

“AN EXCELLENT IDEA!”

**Leading Surrogate Warfare in
Southeast Asia, 1951–1970
— A Personal Account**

**James W. “Bill” Lair
As told to Thomas L. Ahern, Jr.**



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in Southeast Asia, 1951–1970,
a Personal Account**

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Collaborator's Preface

A newly arrived case officer in the Vientiane Station in December 1960, I was going down the stairs one morning when I met Chief of Station (COS) Gordon Jorgensen headed up, escorting a bespectacled man I did not recognize. He looked at first glance like a desk-bound administrative type, almost the stereotype of an accountant. It was a couple of days before we were introduced and I discovered that he was Bill Lair, the CIA's chief adviser—and de facto co-commander—of the Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU) of the Royal Thai Border Police.

The Vientiane Station and Washington had already made the decision to explore the prospects of launching a program of irregular warfare in hopes of adding some backbone to the Laotian defense against communist incursions. Eager to be a part of it, I had talked Jorgy (as he was known throughout the station) into moving me from the intelligence collection branch to the nascent paramilitary effort, aimed at the communist Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese troops supporting it.

The transfer put me in almost daily contact with Bill, but it was months before I realized that his quiet, unassertive manner, though obviously a genuine feature of his personality, was also the key to his success with PARU and with Thai counterparts in general. He was totally free of the proclivity of so many American advisers in Third World countries to substitute instruction for consultation and orders for suggestions, and his egalitarian style had earned him the respect and affection of both officers and noncoms.

I served an apprenticeship of several months, first with Bill and PARU in Vientiane, learning mainly paramilitary management procedures, and then with Hmong leader Vang Pao and paramilitary officer Jack Shirley in the mountains south of the Plain of Jars, learning how to represent the American side of a tripartite operation. In mid-1961, I was sent to Thakhek, in the Laotian Panhandle, to organize a much smaller effort, using ethnic Lao rather than Hmong volunteers. I then went on to Vietnam and other assignments, and after Laos did not see Bill again until we had both retired and I was writing the CIA's history of its involvement in the war in Laos. He mentioned his interest in doing a memoir and his trepidations about attempting a book-length account; I volunteered to help. This is the result, encompassing interviews and correspondence from 1998 to 2000.

A word about the shape of this memoir. When Bill's health began to fail, we had not completed my debriefings on his last year or two in Udon Thani (or Udorn, as it was known during his time there), the Headquarters tour, and his later years in Bangkok. We suspended work on the project, and he passed away in 2014 without our having taken it further. I did not return to it until spring 2020. Reviewing the manuscript then, it appeared to me that we had covered enough of the events of his career to illustrate an extraordinary life with the material

in hand. The result is a somewhat uneven structure, with later years getting progressively less attention. Regrettable as this is, I think it is offset by the crucial importance of the earlier periods—World War II service, creation of PARU, establishment and management of the Laotian irregulars, liaison with the Royal Thai Government—both to Bill himself and to the record of his achievements. I hope the reader will share this sentiment

When I met Bill, he had already served eight years in Thailand. Although he had consciously avoided the affectations that accompany “going native,” he had also, from the start, comported himself as a participant in a collective project, accepting the inconveniences of living with the troops, participating in jungle training exercises and in general enduring whatever they had to face. It was this basic respect for his counterparts, I think, that allowed him to form the unique relationships so vital to his success.

His was a truly unique career, almost certain never to be replicated, even in its broad outlines. Over 20 years working with the same foreign government, accepting a commission in that country's national police force, sharing command of an elite Thai security unit, meanwhile serving just one Headquarters tour in the course of his entire career: It all makes for a fascinating episode in US efforts to resist communist incursions into Southeast Asia during the Cold War.

But it is a great deal more than a war story. One can also see Bill's career as a model for the conduct of an officer charged with creating and managing the US portion of a joint effort against a common adversary. Of the many enviable features of Bill's dealings with both Thai and American colleagues, perhaps the most conspicuous was his transparent and unflinching honesty—in Thailand, he was known as “the man who never lies”—expressed in a self-effacing style that elicited willing cooperation even from people whose goodwill was not to be taken for granted. Other features, perhaps less crucial when looked at individually, combine to fill out the picture: adaptability, patience, affability, persistence, and the total absence of bureaucratic ambition.

Not all these virtues are to be expected as a default setting in even the best operations officers' approaches to their work. Bill's selfless commitment to a single institution—the Thai security unit that he founded—is not the kind of thing that can or would be expected from everyone, even in a demanding trade whose practitioners think of themselves as members of a professional elite. But his career certainly is an example of professional practice at an extraordinarily high level of integrity and competence, and viewed from this perspective has a great deal to teach the rest of us. Shakespeare could have been anticipating Bill Lair when he wrote, “In thy face I see the map of honour, truth and loyalty.”^a

An CIA old-timer who reads this description might be tempted to see in it the glorification of “rapport” with an operational contact that ruled DO recruitment doctrine for decades (how many is hard to say, as it only gradually faded, and may not be defunct, even now). Rapport, meaning simply a cordial personal relationship, would seem to be a prerequisite for the success of any recruitment pitch or liaison relationship, but in those days it had an unmistakably condescending tone, born of the Agency's adoption—surely unconscious—of the

a. Henry VI, Part 2, Act 3, Scene 1.

“American century” pretensions of the era. Factors such as common interests, shared political convictions, and personal vulnerabilities scarcely entered into this calculation; goodwill and a little cash should suffice to close a deal. This is what accounts for the qualitative difference between rapport, as we then pursued it, and the bond between people that arises from the recognition of shared interests.

In Bill Lair's case, community of interest was key to the entire venture; that and his personal style encouraged his Thai counterparts to cooperate in a way that conferred an enormous multiplication of benefits at a very modest price.

Fate deprived Bill of a chance to furnish a lessons-learned kind of coda to his story, and I therefore take the liberty of pointing out here some things that I think his career has to teach members of our profession. To be sure, the locales, cultures, and politics of more recent paramilitary efforts are vastly different from those that shaped his activities. And the weapons and communications technologies have been simply revolutionized. But what this story has to teach has to do more with human nature and how a representative of one culture works his will on members of another. These things transcend nationality and ethnicity as they determine the success or failure of efforts to join disparate cultures in a common cause. Here is where Bill Lair's enduring legacy is to be found.

* * *

Obvious as it may seem, the necessity to behave as a partner when dealing with partners, especially when these dealings take place in third-world countries, has not always been recognized by American advisers, whether civilian or military. Bill Lair's approach, greatly facilitated by the happy accident of an ideally suited personality, demonstrated how the emphasis on collaboration succeeds not only in building cordial working relationships but in exploiting those relationships covertly, if necessary, to advance specific US policy or operational goals. The Lair story has numerous such episodes, one of them the clandestine use of a Thai Border Police airstrip, without the knowledge of the government in Bangkok, to supply Indonesian rebels in the US-supported 1957 uprising there.

More important than the occasional undeclared use of project assets was Bill's emphasis on creating a security force capable of functioning without its advisers' guidance. The PARU modus operandi, dictated by the need to cover hundreds of miles of mountainous border with a unit no bigger than a light battalion, called for the deployment of small teams capable of dealing with diverse targets. On Thai territory, these were mainly Burmese smugglers and Thai communist insurgents. In Laos, its operations more directly served American interests, and the PARU teams there, sometimes accompanied by CIA paramilitary officers and sometimes not, were charged with the training, support, and guidance of thousands of Hmong irregulars.

Not every manager of CIA's contribution to the shaping of an allied security force will be able to participate in choosing the leadership of that force, and in this respect Bill was certainly fortunate in working with the Thai. Being free of a history of Western colonial domination, they were more amenable to a collegial style of dealing with foreigners than was the case

elsewhere, and if it served their interests were entirely willing to share command authority over Thai personnel, as Bill discovered, even before PARU was created.

This is far from saying that Bill's experience is irrelevant to joint activity with people more sensitive to perceived Western imperiousness. He taught me, for one, that exerting influence on an ally can be a most delicate business, as it became clear when my service in Laos was followed by a tour in Vietnam, where the memory of French domination, and attendant sensitivities, were still fresh when I arrived in 1963. I am far from the only beneficiary of association with Bill Lair; perhaps the story of his life and career will also enrich the professional lives of readers who never had the good fortune to meet him.

—Thomas L. Ahern, Jr.

* * *

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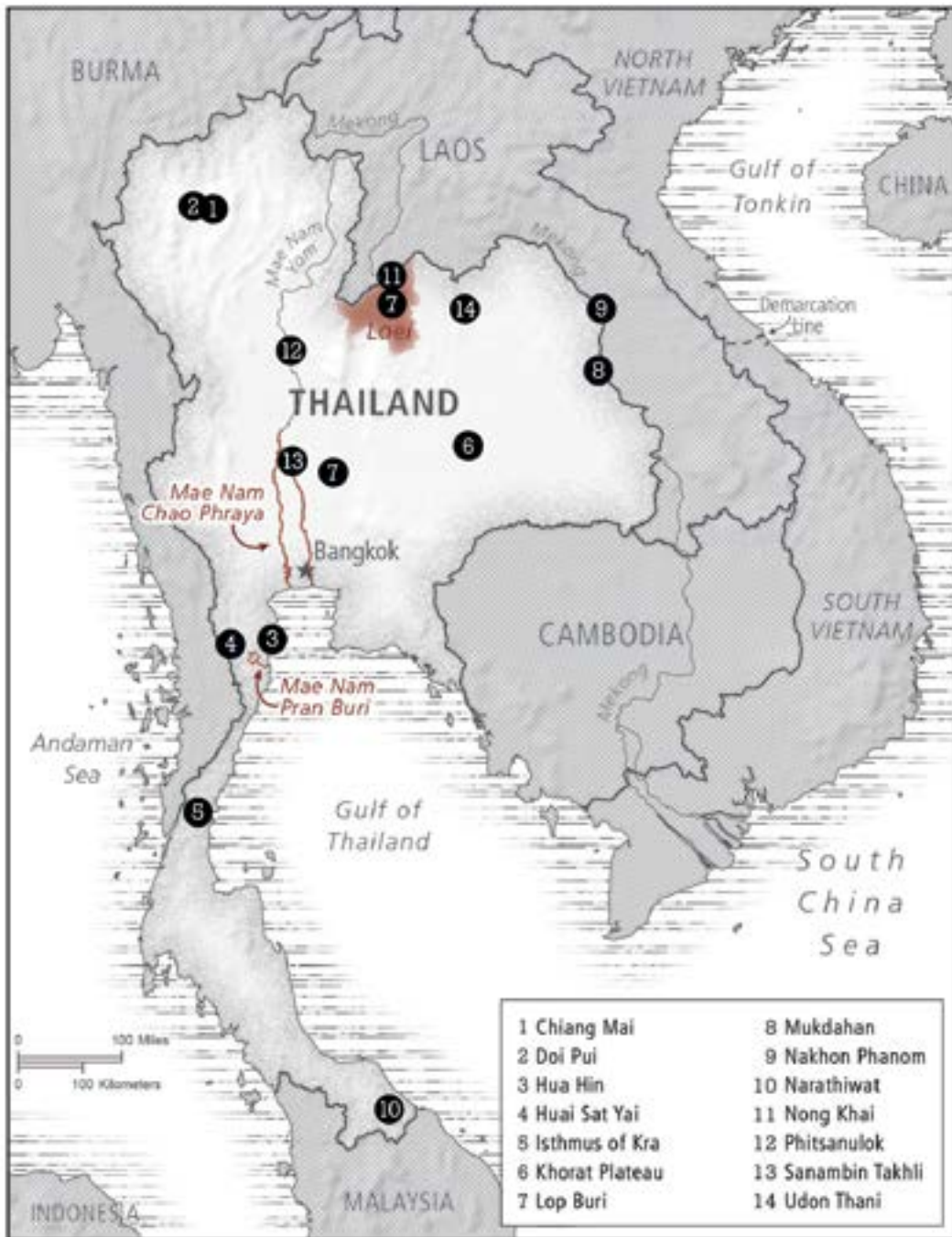


Acronyms and Initialisms

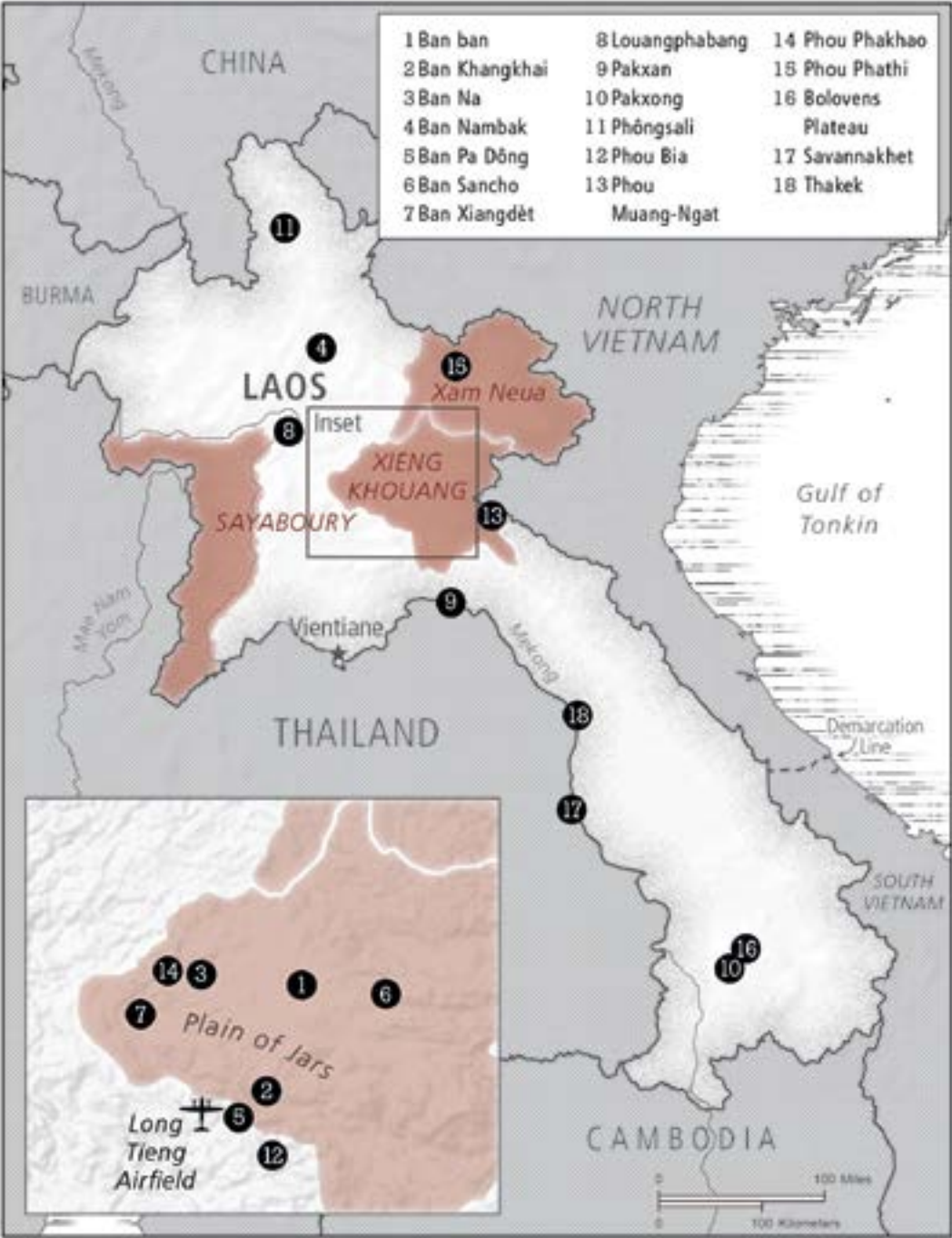
BIC	Border Information Center
BPP	Thai Border Patrol Police
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CAT	Civil Air Transport
COS	CIA chief of station
FAR	Forces Armées du Royaume (Laotiennes)
JOT	CIA Junior Officer Trainees
MACV	Military Assistance Command/Vietnam
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
PARU	Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit
PEO	Program Evaluation Office
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
RTA	Royal Thai Army
SEACORD	Southeast Asia Coordination Committee
SEA (or Sea) Supply	Southeast Asia Supply Company
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
SGU	Special Guerrilla Unit
SOT	Special Operating Team
USAID	US Agency for International Development
USOM	United States Operations Mission

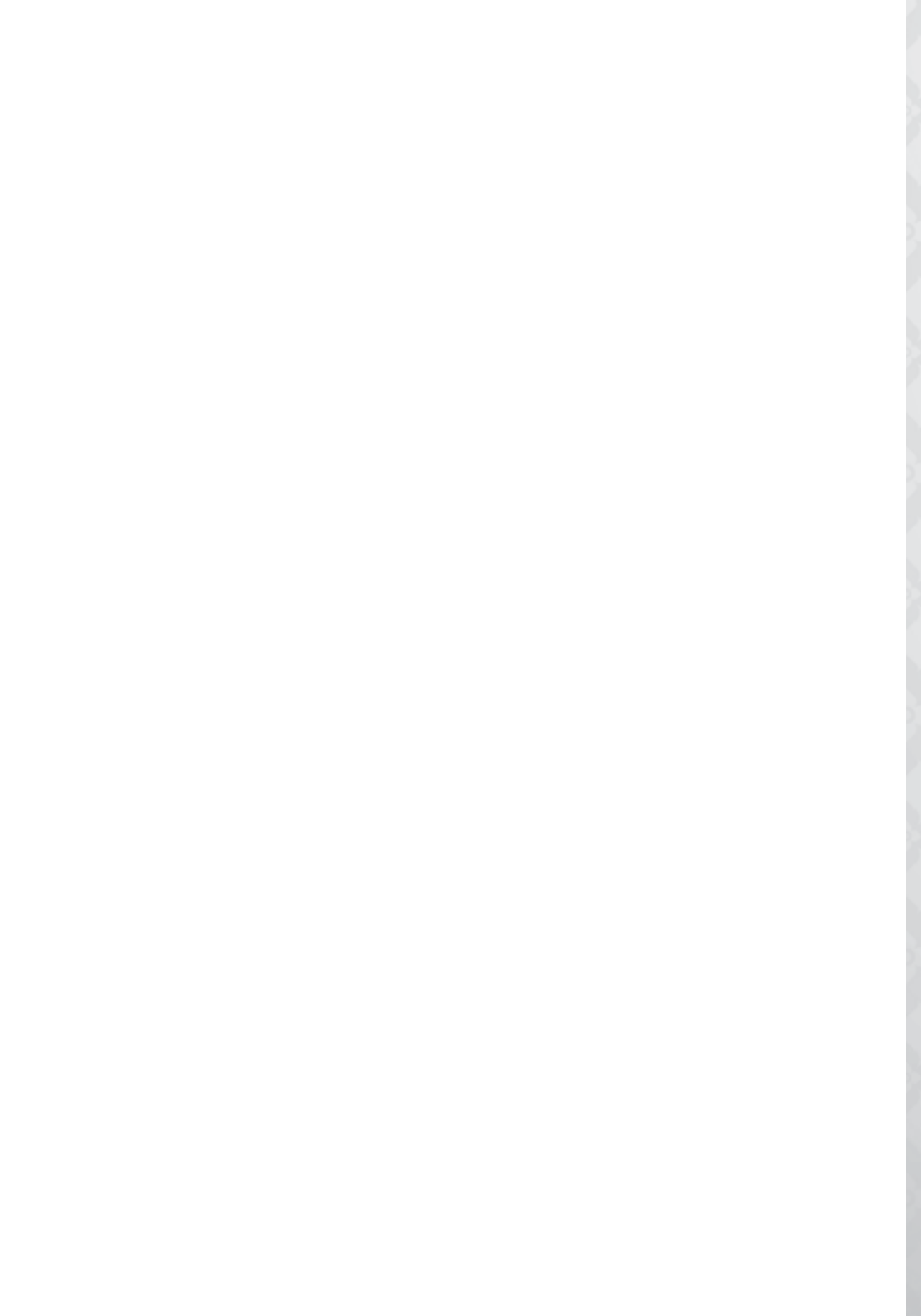


Locations Mentioned in Thailand



Locations Mentioned in Laos





“An Excellent Idea”:
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Chapter 1

Prologue: "I was on my own."

“Most OSS veterans with experience in partisan warfare had either left OSS after the war or, like future CIA Director Bill Colby, were now managing the new CIA. The bulk of the field work in Thailand would have to be done by new hands.”



Saneh Sittiphan and Bill Lair led the creation and initial development of the Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU).

General Phao must have relished the dramatic contrast between his office in Paruskawan Palace and the uninspired architecture of the Western-style government buildings that surrounded it. As Saneh and I drove through the bougainvillea-draped gate that day in early 1953, I saw first a steeply pitched tile roof of traditional Thai design. It covered a long, one-story edifice of weathered, reddish-brown hardwood elevated on pilings driven deep into Bangkok's brackish soil.

Two external stairways, one at each end, rose to a veranda whose overhanging roof projected toward us, shading the offices that ran the length of the building at the rear. Saneh—Capt. Saneh Sittiphan of the Thai National Police—and I climbed up and crossed the brilliantly polished teak floor to announce ourselves to General Phao's aide.

We were there at my initiative. Our immediate superiors—mine in the Southeast Asia Supply Company and his in the police—had not been invited. Having agreed to serve as my escort from our camp at Lop Buri, north of Bangkok, Saneh had done as much as he could. He was unwilling to antagonize his seniors by going over their heads and would remain outside during the meeting with General Phao. I was on my own.

It would have done no good to argue with Saneh, but I was nervously aware that, as far as protocol was concerned, the disparity loomed larger in my case than in his. I was 28 years old, had been in Thailand for less than two years, and was earning about as much as a second lieutenant in the US army. The man I had come to see, General Phao Sriyanond, was director general of the National Police and the second-most powerful man in Thailand.

The aide, aware of Saneh's limited role, showed him to a chair in the open-air anteroom on the veranda, then ushered me into Phao's office. There I saw more lustrous teak floor, all the more conspicuous for the room's spare furnishings. A simple, businesslike desk, a few chairs, perhaps a file cabinet, and a row of official portraits on one wall. But no General Phao. With a smile but no explanation, the aide left me to wait.

It might have been only 10 minutes, but my nervousness and uncertainty made it seem like an hour before Phao emerged from an adjoining room. I had met him once at a meeting of the new SEA Supply contingent, and I was therefore familiar with his shock of thick, perfectly white hair and his spotless white uniform. In a jacket with gold shoulder boards and shorts with heavy, knee-length socks, in the British fashion, he cut a very striking figure.

It was not merely striking. It was unique. I had seen no other Thai official who dressed in the British style. His other conspicuous idiosyncrasy was his white hair. When Thai men turn gray, they usually do so late in life and then often restore the original black with dye. In typically contrarian fashion, Phao had chosen to color his hair white when it began prematurely to gray. His appearance reinforced his reputation for quirky individualism.

The general apologized for keeping me waiting, adding that he had been taking a little catnap, a practice that kept him alert during his long work day. It also, he confessed, helped promote his image as someone able to work twice around the clock. Already familiar with his renowned capacity for work, I found myself admiring his candor as he volunteered to me, almost a stranger, that he cultivated this perception as part of his leadership style.

We quickly finished with pleasantries, for Phao was nothing if not businesslike. “What is it you want from me?” he asked.

I began by reminding him of the extraordinary quality of the 100-man instructor cadre, expert in guerrilla and counter guerrilla warfare, that he had allowed me to help construct over the past two years. This group, all volunteers from the National Police and most from the noncommissioned ranks, had now trained almost 2,500 men—half from the National Police, 1,000 from the army, and smaller contingents of Air Force, Navy, and civilian Interior Ministry personnel. The civilians were mostly officials from the offices of provincial governors and district chiefs. Along with their more numerous military colleagues, they now represented the core of a potentially vital resistance to the Communist Chinese invasion we all feared. The instructor cadre itself would be dispersed, however, unless it acquired some kind of institutional status that would replace the present ad hoc arrangement between the National Police and SEA Supply.

Phao nodded and gestured for me to continue. I quickly listed the areas into which the SEA Supply advisory and support program was beginning to expand. My colleagues in Bangkok were working with the Water Police and had just begun to train the newly created Border Police. Every Thai element involved had its own institutional identity. Only the Lop Buri irregular warfare cadre existed on a provisional basis, its personnel all on loan from other units.

The general knew better than I what had led to this expansion of the SEA Supply office in Thailand. In the early 1950s, Thailand faced two immediate threats to its border areas. One came from its giant northern neighbor, China, and involved the remote, mountainous, and very porous frontiers with Laos and Burma. The other came from French Indochina, across the Mekong River. There, the French Expeditionary Force was already engaged in its fateful struggle with Ho Chi Minh’s Viet Minh guerrillas. A Franco-Thai treaty prevented the Thai army from deploying closer than 25 kilometers from the border, and this had already facilitated Viet Minh occupation of a Cambodian town on the Thai border. The prospect of French defeat heralded a growing threat from a Vietnamese-sponsored insurgency in and through the Vietnamese settlements in Northeast Thailand.

With some trepidation—Phao’s demeanor was courteous but entirely noncommittal—I went on to tell him that I thought the current preparations to resist such subversion should include the creation of a mobile police reserve. What he needed, I argued, was the capability to conduct police intelligence and combat operations anywhere in the country’s immensely diverse geography. Such a unit could parachute reinforcements at threatened points and enforce the rule of law against either communist subversives or the bandits and smugglers who exploited the government’s feeble hold on remote areas.

As my host remained attentive, I pointed out the advantages of vesting such a capability in the police rather than in the army. First, the police had the power of arrest and could legitimately perform an internal security function. Second, the constraints of the Franco-Thai military treaty would not apply to it, meaning that its forces could be deployed as close to the Mekong River as Phao might wish. As for staffing, Phao need look no farther than Lop Buri, where a 50-man cadre awaited instructions.

I feared the general might find my suggestion more than a little presumptuous, coming as it did from an unseasoned foreigner some 25 years his junior. He heard me out with no interruption, however, and, when I finished, questioned me about staffing and logistics.

Saneh and I had anticipated that, if Phao didn't reject the notion out of hand, he would at least want time to consider it. He had another question for me, however: "Will you participate in the unit's creation?" I assured him that, if he wanted me, I would be honored to accept. To my delighted surprise, he then announced in his formal, slightly stilted, English, "You have an excellent idea."

We had a deal: the police would furnish personnel and facilities, while SEA Supply would contribute ordnance, communications, and air transport. Phao asked for my recommendation for a site, and—having anticipated this question—I proposed using the police barracks at Hua Hin, on the Gulf of Thailand south of Bangkok.

Phao told me that his only concern was my own status. If I were to become a member of the new unit, my status as an adviser would no longer suffice. "You must become an officer in our police."

This demand evoked in me the image of an incredulous SEA Supply office wondering if I'd forgotten whom I worked for. I could hardly say this to Phao, so I temporized with a mumbled apology about the anomaly of a foreigner enjoying membership in an official Thai service. By way of reply, Phao led me to the line of portraits I had noticed when I entered. Each, he said, pictured one of his predecessors as director general of the National Police. I had guessed something of the sort but had entirely missed what Phao now pointed out to me. The first uniformed figure was clearly a European.

Phao explained that, during his campaign to introduce Western economic and administrative practices in the late 19th century, the great modernizing King Chulalongkorn had come to admire different countries for different achievements. The Danish police had seemed to him particularly effective, and he accordingly hired a Dane to head Thailand's new police force. Given this precedent, my appointment to the National Police should pose no difficulty. The new unit would be attached to the armored regiment known as the Royal Guard, and I would be one of its officers.

Phao said nothing about my precise duties or degree of authority, and I saw no reason to ask. I had spent almost two years among his subordinates with no formal definition of my role, working out solutions to problems without any explicit division of responsibility. I had no doubt that this arrangement would carry over to my role in the new unit, and Phao's silence on the matter suggested that he shared this view. Indeed, throughout our association, which

lasted until his ouster from government in 1957, we seemed always to be of one mind both on the direction of the project and on my part in it. This as much as anything else, I think, is what allowed our rather exotic undertaking to prosper.

It helped that I was content to work on an entirely collegial basis, always acting as adviser, not commander—even after becoming an officer in the National Police. In any case, the Thai officials I most needed to influence were situated higher in the chain of command, and I had no option but to get my way by gentle persuasion. The operative word here is “gentle,” for, very early in my experience with the Thai, I found that they seldom changed their minds. “No” remained “no.”

I had always preferred to build a consensus rather than impose my own views, however, and I never forgot that, however much my hosts might desire American advisory and material support, I lived and worked in their country. I therefore learned very quickly to back off before forcing Phao or any other Thai into what would then be a negative decision. Instead of pressing the issue, I would await the opportunity to raise it again, perhaps with a new line of argumentation. I would repeat this, almost like a regime of medication, until, usually, I got what I wanted. I imagine that I won some of these discussions simply by endurance: they may sometimes have given in just to get rid of me. Nevertheless, I always thought that influencing the outcome of a practical issue was more important than trying to project an aura of authority.

In one sense, the creation of the new border security unit was highly contingent on and reflected the converging interests and perceptions of two individuals. SEA Supply had readily accepted the idea, which I had submitted before I solicited the session with General Phao, but none of my superiors would have taken the initiative if I had not. In addition, the activity would never have progressed beyond wishful thinking without the clear-headed and decisive General Phao.

In another sense, I can now see the meeting in Phao’s office as a natural outgrowth of events of the preceding decade. First came the Japanese conquest of Southeast Asia, beginning in 1940, and the role of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in forming and executing US policy toward Thailand during World War II. This was followed, after the victory over the Axis powers, by the collapse of the wartime Western alliance with the Soviet Union and the subsequent triumph of Mao Zedong’s communists over the Chinese Nationalists.

The Japanese army invaded the northernmost part of Vietnam in September 1940 and completed the occupation of all French Indochina—including Laos and Cambodia—in the summer of 1941. With a secure base in French Indochina, the Japanese were free to pursue their larger objectives. These included the invasion of Burma and Malaya, then British possessions. Only Thailand stood in the way.

The Thai saw their dilemma and had earlier asked the United Kingdom for military aid. The hard-pressed British had no resources to spare, however. The United States was still formally neutral and did not then represent a source of help. The Thai therefore had to rely on their own meager resources as they tried to avoid being absorbed into Japan’s so-called Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.

With Japanese divisions just across the Mekong, the Thai faced military defeat if they resisted and the humiliation of occupation even if they did not. This dilemma was personified in the two Paris-educated leaders who had overthrown the absolute monarchy in 1932. Although united in that effort, they nevertheless represented antithetical political views. Prime Minister Pibul Songkram was a conservative nationalist and a colonel in the Royal Thai army; some called him a fascist. Pridi Banomyong, Pibul's finance minister, promoted the views on social and economic justice for the masses that he had acquired as a student; some called him a communist.

Despite their differences, both Pibul and Pridi recognized their country's plight. The tiny Thai army stood no chance of defeating a Japanese invasion. Nevertheless, when the expected Japanese ultimatum arrived, on the very day of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Pridi, acting in Pibul's absence, issued orders to fight. My subsequent friend and colleague, Pranet Ritruetchai, was then a cadet at the National Military Academy, and he told me how he was called out with the rest of the student body to be issued weapons and ammunition. Japanese marines at first encountered vigorous resistance from the Thai army, but, on returning to Bangkok the following day, Pibul ordered a ceasefire. Pranet never forgot the emotional scene in which he and other cadets wept as the Japanese marched in without further opposition.

As in France and Italy under the Nazis, the political left led the resistance in Thailand, while the right wing produced the most dedicated collaborators. Some of those who collaborated did so out of despair at the apparent lack of alternatives, there being nowhere to turn for help in late 1941. Indeed, Thai friends of mine who participated in the resistance think that Pridi and Pibul had made a tacit bargain about what to do in those agonizing days. Pibul would continue in office, accommodating the Japanese as much as necessary while holding them to their agreement to respect the government's continued sovereignty over Thai citizens. Pridi, meanwhile, would organize an intelligence and resistance network that would try to keep the Allies informed of Japanese military activity in and through Thailand. That network would later rescue the crews of Allied aircraft that went down in Thailand.

My Thai friends also believe that Pibul and Pridi had a second tacit understanding, this one regarding the consequences of an Allied victory. In that event, they thought, Pibul would have to accept at least nominal punishment for his qualified collaboration, and Pridi would take over the government. Only in that way would the resistance be able to assert its legitimacy as a liberation government.

Some foreign observers think that Pibul's cooperation with the Japanese was essentially unconditional, and it is true that he chose Japan as a refuge when the military coup of 1957 forced him into exile. Nevertheless, his reputation among the Thai is that of a man who did his best in impossible circumstances to mitigate the effects of the Japanese occupation.

Similar ambiguities surround Pridi's career. He was labeled a communist by some, especially after his sojourn in China following his brief postwar stint as prime minister. He had no known links to the Thai Communist Party, however, and his choice of refuge in Beijing, at a time of intensifying Cold War tensions, probably reflected his limited options rather than ideological affiliation. By this time, the West had already demonstrated its preference for his archrival—the

militantly anti-communist, if arch-conservative, Pibul—and I doubt that Pridi got many invitations to safehaven. To be sure, both harbored political ambitions, but I think that in their different—sometimes contradictory—ways, both wanted above all to preserve Thai independence.

In early 1942, however, independence was no more than a dream. After occupying Thailand, Japanese forces swallowed up Burma and Malaya. Other Japanese divisions attacked the American-owned Philippine Islands. The occupation of Indonesia, still a Dutch colony, completed the takeover of Southeast Asia.

Even before Pearl Harbor, the Thai dilemma had come to the attention of Col. William J. Donovan, President Franklin Roosevelt's Coordinator of Information and future creator of the legendary Office of Strategic Services, OSS. When Pibul's government declared war on the United States in January 1942, Donovan urged Roosevelt not to reciprocate but to treat the declaration as if it had been issued under Japanese duress. In that way, he argued, the United States could more easily work with anti-Japanese Thai both in Thailand and in the United States. Roosevelt accepted Donovan's argument, and Washington made the unprecedented gesture of remaining at peace with a self-declared enemy.^a

Donovan's leadership set the stage for the preeminent role of the OSS in American dealings with Thailand during World War II. Subsequent OSS support to the anti-Japanese movement called the Free Thai created relationships that survived the dissolution of OSS. These, in turn, assured that CIA, as successor to the OSS, enjoyed pride of place among US agencies in postwar Thailand.

The first practical effect of US neutrality toward Thailand came with the decision of the Thai ambassador, Seni Pramoj, to defy orders from Bangkok to return home. From the embassy in Washington, the Oxford-educated lawyer and member of Thai nobility quickly became the central figure in the construction of an underground organization in Thailand.

One of Ambassador Seni's first moves, in early 1942, was to encourage Pridi to accept the leadership of the Thai underground. Just how they communicated, I do not know, but continued Thai administration of the kingdom's territory presumably allowed the discreet use of postal facilities and perhaps even coded messages via commercial telegraph.

Once in contact with the indigenous leadership, Ambassador Seni began recruiting Thai students still in the United States into the Free Thai movement. About 25 went under OSS auspices to Fort Benning, Georgia, where they were trained in intelligence collection and guerrilla warfare. They were then infiltrated into Thailand by boat or parachute. OSS personnel accompanied some of them as instructors and advisers. In this way, the OSS became a vital American presence in Thailand during the war. Its officers personified the US commitment to the eventual expulsion of the Japanese. At the same time, they built relationships of trust with many who would become members of Thailand's postwar elite.^b

a. During his brief service as US ambassador to Thailand, Donovan several times visited the training camp I helped build and supervise at Lop Buri. At one of these sessions, he described his intervention with Roosevelt on behalf of the Thai.

b. Among these were Pong Sarasin, former deputy prime minister and later chairman of Coca Cola Co., Thailand; Piya Chakapak, former director general of the National Intelligence Agency; and Air Marshal Sitthi Savetsila, who would serve as director of the National Security Council, minister of foreign affairs, and a member of the King's Council.

The experience of a Free Thai mission that parachuted into the country in May 1944 illustrates the atmosphere in occupied Thailand. The team—whose members included my future brother-in-law and foreign minister, Sitthi Savetsila—landed by mischance near Bangkok on a military installation being used by the Japanese. The terms of the agreement with Japan specified that internal order would be maintained by the Royal Thai Government when any Thai nationals were involved, and the installation was therefore patrolled by Thai police. It was such a patrol that captured Sitthi and his team, which had fallen victim to navigational error but had landed with personnel uninjured and the radio unharmed.

As it happened, the team's confinement amounted to protective custody, for the prison authorities actually promoted the achievement of its mission. Sitthi and his men had been instructed to establish contact with Pridi and the Free Thai leadership and then set up a radio link with the headquarters of the Allied commander for Southeast Asia, Lord Louis Mountbatten. This they did, installing their radio in a prison cell and using couriers to exchange messages with Pridi. Prime Minister Pibul was either left in the dark about all of this or, if he learned of it, chose to ignore it.

Sitthi's team was just one of several sending intelligence reports by radio; others had been dropped in by parachute or infiltrated by submarine, landing on remote beaches. As the war progressed, the Allies bombed Japanese installations in Bangkok and elsewhere in Thailand, and the Free Thai rescued a number of air crews shot down during these raids. When the atomic bomb ended Japanese resistance in August 1945, the US Navy was still smuggling weapons to the Free Thai in preparation for armed resistance to divert Japanese forces that might otherwise be withdrawn to defend the homeland.

The heroics of the Free Thai did not expunge their government's record of wartime complicity with the Japanese, and, at the end of the war, the British tried to maneuver the United States into letting them annex a strip of Thai territory adjoining Malaya. General Donovan again came to the rescue—at least by his own account—persuading President Harry Truman, newly in office after the death of President Roosevelt, to veto the proposal. Donovan's reputation for defending Thailand's territorial integrity made him a national hero.

Donovan's sympathy for the plight of the Thai in World War II and the OSS role in creating and supporting the Free Thai made CIA a natural point of appeal in 1950, when the Thai began looking for help against a communist expansion believed to be sponsored or conducted by the Chinese.

The North Korean invasion of the South in June 1950 and the Chinese entry into the war later that year raised the specter of a concerted Chinese drive to establish communist hegemony in Asia. Having just experienced Japanese military aggression, the Thai saw every reason to fear that Chinese Communists would use the same means to impose their militant version of Marxism. Native Thai also worried that the very substantial ethnic Chinese population in Thailand would see Mao Zedong as an anti-colonial hero and that their loyalty to the king—never taken for granted—would be transferred to the new regime in Beijing.

The government accordingly approached Ambassador Edwin F. Stanton, who promised to forward the Thai request for military aid. The Thai—especially Pibul—saw Stanton as a

partisan of the exiled Pridi and worried that, for that reason, he might not proceed with the dispatch they thought their predicament required. Should he temporize, their plea might languish in Washington when they needed immediate, tangible assistance in signaling to the Chinese a serious US commitment.

Accordingly, the so-called Erawan Committee—the Erawan is the flying three-headed elephant of Thai mythology and the national symbol of Laos—used its World War II contacts to get in touch with old friends from the OSS. An informal group of military officers, mostly veterans of the Free Thai movement, the committee included Prime Minister Pibul, First army Commander Sarit Thanarat, and the commander of the Royal Thai Air Force. One of their connections was Willis H. Bird, who had used the OSS base in Kunming in southwest China to drop weapons to both the Free Thai and Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh. Bird had gone into business in Bangkok after the war and had gravitated toward the well-connected former Free Thai.

The Thai approached Bird with their problem, and he responded by getting in touch with his old friend and former boss in Kunming, Paul Halliwell. Halliwell, in turn, agreed to visit Bangkok on the way to a scheduled visit to Saigon.

Halliwell found a receptive audience on returning to Washington in the summer of 1950. Southeast Asia was already getting more US attention because Mao's troops had reached the border with Vietnam in 1949, giving the communist-led Viet Minh a new logistical base and safe haven. In response, the United States had undertaken massive support to the French forces opposing independence for Indochina. Viet Minh strength continued to grow, however, and Thailand's proximity to both French Indochina and China put it in immediate danger. An effort to bolster Thai independence seemed imperative.

Washington also desperately wanted Asian partners for the multinational expeditionary force in Korea. It saw the kind of program requested by the Erawan Committee as an incentive to Thai participation in the struggle to repel the North Korean invasion. All of this took place against the background of the Soviet absorption of Eastern Europe in the late 1940s and Western fears of an invasion by the Red army and its Eastern European satraps.

With a regular program of military assistance still in the planning stage, Washington found an interim solution in the form of the Southeast Asia Supply Company, which set up shop in Bangkok in 1950 as a private contractor to the Royal Thai Government. Arriving a year before the first military aid, it began training Thai military and police personnel in intelligence collection and irregular warfare techniques. At the same time, Thailand became the first nation to support US and South Korean forces when it sent four C-47 cargo aircraft to transport wounded soldiers from the front in Korea to hospitals in Japan.

Meanwhile, SEA Supply was struggling to find people to man its office in Bangkok. A few old OSS hands were available, and I worked with several of them in my early years in Thailand. Most OSS veterans with experience in partisan warfare had either left OSS after the war or, like future CIA Director Bill Colby, were now managing the new CIA. The bulk of the field work in Thailand would have to be done by new hands.



Chapter 2

“I was hoping you would get a real job.”

“In the single most important lesson of my entire army service, I learned that motivation is everything. Anyone, no matter how apparently ill-suited to combat, can be made into an effective soldier if he is fighting for a cause he believes in.”



Phillips refinery and workers' houses. Borger, Texas. Hutchinson County United States Texas Borger, 1942. Nov. Vachon, John, photographer. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017840340/>.

Nothing in my formal credentials suggested that I would be a suitable candidate for an assignment like the one I began in Thailand in 1951. When I arrived in Bangkok, I had no foreign language beyond a little college Spanish—certainly no Thai. Nor did my academic background contain anything relevant to unconventional warfare and the clandestine operations that assignment entailed. As a combat veteran of World War II, I knew something about weapons and conventional tactics, but I had no experience with guerrilla or jungle warfare.

Nevertheless, some aspects of my upbringing and experience helped me adapt very quickly to the demands of a new environment. One of the main lessons of my childhood was adaptability, a lesson I learned from a combination of family instability and chronic poverty.

Oklahoma, where I was born on the 4th of July 1924, was at the time a hard place for even the most disciplined and persistent working man, and my father was not the most reliable of breadwinners. Handsome and charming, he shrank from responsibility of any kind. The result was chronic unemployment for him and hardship for his family.

My mother’s sister came to our rescue in 1927 with an invitation for us to come to the Texas panhandle town of Borger. Oil deposits had created a boom town there, and jobs were plentiful, if not always well paid. Much of the town consisted of workers’ tents, the better of which had wooden floors. My aunt and her family had lived in one of these tents for a couple of years but had finally managed to build a house. The tent was ours—if we wanted it.

At that point, my mother welcomed the prospect of any dwelling we could call our own. The only issue was getting there. About the only thing my family owned at the time was a decrepit Model-T Ford. Whether it would manage the trip to Borger over primitive dirt roads was open to question, but my father needed work, and there was no other transportation. So we set out, my parents, two sisters, and I. Even with five passengers, the old car accommodated the meager household goods my mother had managed to accumulate.

The car survived, but our money ran out. By the time we reached a campsite at McLean, Texas, we were out of food and almost out of gasoline. Loathing the necessity to beg, my mother appealed to the proprietor of the combined grocery and gas station there to lend us enough money to get to Borger.

Hers can hardly have been the first such request to come his way, and he must have acquired a justifiable skepticism about the prospect of repayment. I suspect it was not just my mother’s simple honesty but also the aura of genuine moral authority she radiated throughout her entire life that moved him to help us. Needless to say, she ensured that the Good

Samaritan was repaid out of my father's first paycheck. Years later, she still loved to recall the stranger's act of kindness and trust.

I recall something else. For all the hardships she endured, my mother retained a compassion for those even less fortunate. I still remember, for example, her chronic outrage at the way the federal government neglected the Indian tribes of our region. I like to think that her example helped me accept as equals the many so-called "primitive" people I later came to work with in the mountains of Thailand and Laos.

The move to Borger did nothing to improve my father's attitude toward work, and my mother realized that, as long as he had any control over the family finances, we would never climb out of poverty. She desperately wanted an education for her children, and this gave her the courage needed in those days and circumstances to start divorce proceedings. For my father, divorce was easier than accepting responsibility. He left, and none of us ever saw him again. He abandoned his parents as well, not even showing up at their funerals when they died a number of years later.

The problem of a parasitical head of household had now disappeared, but it was replaced by the Great Depression. Although divorce had freed my mother to start a career, the job market collapsed. Unable both to look for work and to care for her children, she found relatives to take us in. She had remained close to my father's parents after the divorce, and they took my older sister, Charlene, and me to stay at their ranch in the Texas panhandle near the town of Claude. Meanwhile, my younger sister, Narcille, went to live with my mother's parents.

My grandfather, William Harlan Lair, had started out working for Charles A. Goodnight, one of the first settlers in the Texas panhandle. Well before I came to live with him and grandmother, he had bought his own ranch, and he was then also working in the oil business. Born shortly after the Civil War, he was fiercely independent and abhorred seeking help from any government entity, even from the local sheriff if thieves made off with a steer.

Grandfather Lair was no one's whipping boy, however, and he had no intention of allowing his grandson to become one either. One day, while still in the second grade, I had to wear a jacket and tie to school for some special occasion. On the way home on the school bus that day, two much larger boys began teasing me about my attire. The teasing escalated into a real mauling, as one of them held me while the other tightened my tie to the point of choking me. During the struggle, I got a major bloody nose and a badly scratched face. When the bus finally stopped and Charlene and I got off, my best clothing was torn and, I was pretty well covered with blood.

My account of the *mêlée* enraged Grandfather Lair, who was not mollified when I told him that a partition behind the driver's seat had prevented him from seeing what was happening to me. The next morning, he walked Charlene and me to the bus stop. When the bus arrived and the driver opened the door, grandfather raised a foot to the running board. His coat fell open, revealing the revolver in his belt. He summarized what had happened to me the day before and said, "I'll be back tomorrow. I want to see that partition gone and a mirror up there so you can see what's going on and protect the smaller children. Otherwise, you won't be driving this bus anymore."

Grandfather did come back the next day, and the desired changes were in place. I suppose the episode was more or less typical of his approach to life, but it stayed with me as an object lesson in taking care of one's own. My surrogate father contributed to my education in more conventional ways as well, making a horseman of me and teaching me the rudiments of cattle ranching and farming.

Meanwhile, my mother struggled to support herself with menial jobs, working as a waitress as she continued her training as a legal secretary. She then got parttime work with a lawyer, which paid only a little more, and continued her schooling at night. She found relief from this when she met Frank Swaffar, who worked at the Borger oil field. He fell in love with her and, despite the encumbrance of her three children, proposed to make her his wife.

They were married in 1934, raising the question of where we would make our new home. My mother cannot have enjoyed living in a tent, but what she really hated in Borger was its lawlessness, and she begged her new husband to find us a more peaceful place to live. As it happened, Frank's employer, an independent oil operator named Rip Underwood—who also owned the largest newspaper in the Texas panhandle, the Amarillo *Globe*—had an oil lease on a ranch a few miles west of town. A number of small houses stood on the leased property, and he rented them at nominal rates to workers with families. Frank obtained one of these, and we moved into our new home.

At the same time, I began the educational experience of my life. The little community on the ranch hosted a three-room school, named Petrolia Ward, in which three teachers taught some 35 to 40 students. With two grades in each room, every student got the disciplined but loving attention of the best teachers I ever knew. I credit their skill and attentiveness in the most unpromising surroundings for my later success as a student. All three teachers would go on to successful careers as district superintendents or even higher. Even then, somehow, they managed to keep track of their former charges. When I graduated from Texas A&M many years later, I got a letter of congratulation from one of them, Mr. James. It was typical of his concern for his students but nevertheless the kind of gesture one does not forget.

By the time we left Borger, I was old enough to know that my mother's dislike for it was well founded. Among the incidents contributing to the frontier atmosphere was the death of the town's founder, "Ace" Borger. He was killed in a shootout with an associate who had lost money when the bank of which Ace was president went bankrupt. The associate later spent 10 years in prison, not for killing Ace but for embezzling county funds. The two were, it seems, birds of a feather.

Our new home insulated us for a while from the chronic violence of life in Borger, but it was not to last. In 1937—I was not yet 13—Frank Swaffar and Grandfather Tompkins—my mother's father—were killed in separate oilfield accidents. My mother, widowed at the age of 32, was again on her own.

Grandmother Florence Tompkins still had the last two of her 13 children at home—a boy, two years younger than I, and a girl one year older. We all moved in together, and my grandmother became the homemaker and my mother the breadwinner. With the proceeds of my stepfather's life insurance, my mother completed her schooling as a legal secretary while

working—still for minuscule pay—for a local lawyer. This led to an appointment as secretary to the county judge in Panhandle, the county seat. We all moved to Panhandle and spent three years there. I earned a modest supplement to the family's income with an after-school job at the local weekly newspaper.

In 1940, my mother found the secure employment she craved when she went to work for the Veterans Administration at Waco. Once again, we moved. The following year, I graduated from high school, two months before my 17th birthday.

In the fall of 1942, despite our chronically strained family finances, I enrolled at Texas A&M, majoring in geology. I tried to concentrate on my studies, but no one was thinking about anything but the war. I was still too young for the draft—I would not be called until 1943—and feared that the show would be over before I arrived, so I begged my mother to let me enlist. She said that it was the hardest thing she had ever had to do but she knew that, in my position, she would want the same thing. If I insisted on it, I could go.

The grizzled old recruiting sergeant told me I could choose my branch of service. I said I'd take the infantry. He looked at me pityingly. "Son," he said, "anybody can get in the infantry." Maybe he had a quota to fill, because he went on to tell me that a bright young man like myself should choose the Armored Corps. That branch was getting the cream of the crop, he said, and Gen. George Patton was about to make it a separate service with its own uniform.

The old sergeant knew how to appeal to an innocent youth. Within a few weeks, I had become a member of the 3rd Armored Division, then stationed at Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania. The mortar platoon of the 3rd Battalion, 32nd Armored Regiment, became my home until the end of the war. The division sailed to England in August 1943, and we landed on Omaha Beach in Normandy on June 13, 1944, one week after D-Day.

My three years with the 3rd Armored taught me some of the most fundamental lessons of my professional life. In training at Indiantown Gap, I was initially appalled at the helplessness of the city boys who constituted a considerable majority of the unit. They couldn't operate machinery, knew nothing of any kind of firearms, had never spent a night in the outdoors, and were afraid of being alone in the dark. It seemed to me that they were most unpromising material for a fighting force.

Growing up in a hybrid of ranch, farm, and frontier town living, I had experience of all of these things. I had no trouble with marksmanship, for example, and I recognized how darkness could serve as an ally against an enemy. I was wrong about the potential of my new comrades-in-arms, however. In the single most important lesson of my entire army service, I learned that motivation is everything. Anyone, no matter how apparently ill-suited to combat, can be made into an effective soldier if he is fighting for a cause he believes in.

Well, almost anyone. A young Italian in my squad was the strongest man I had ever met and a great man to have with us when it came time to dig in, but he was terrified of the dark. On guard alone at night, he was simply incapacitated, hearing nothing but goose-stepping German divisions advancing on our position. It seemed better for all concerned that he not be

forced into perimeter security duties, so I would replace him whenever our squad had to send a man.

This same man was also, as it happened, totally illiterate. In the many idle hours spent waiting to engage the enemy I would read to him his letters from home, answer them for him, and try to teach him to read and write. In return, he made me the beneficiary of his one skill, tailoring. On the rare occasions when we got to go on R&R, I was the best-turned out soldier in the division.

More typical was a growing self-confidence that permitted the common soldier to recognize and seize opportunities. Fairly early in the Normandy campaign, my battalion was advancing down a road that ran through fields bordered by hedgerows, rather like dikes covered with an almost impenetrable undergrowth of vines and brush. My squad leader and two of us were ordered to provide flank security on the left by following a hedgerow running parallel to the road some hundreds of yards away.

Out of sight, out of earshot, and lacking a radio, we were making our way along the hedgerow when we heard muffled commands in German. My squad leader, Sergeant Hermann, forced an opening in the vegetation large enough to see that two German soldiers had crawled through the hedgerow running parallel to ours on the left and were moving toward us. Hermann came from the predominantly German town of Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and could speak the language. He waited until the two Wehrmacht soldiers had almost reached our hedgerow, then shouted in German, "Hands up! Drop your weapons!" The two German soldiers dropped their rifles and put their hands on their heads in the gesture of surrender.

Correctly assuming the two were not alone, Sergeant Hermann barked at them: "Get the others out here! Leave all weapons behind!" He had not expected the number of Germans who, one by one scrambled hands over their heads through their hedgerow. While Hermann provided cover from a concealed position, the other two of us climbed down to search our prisoners for concealed weapons. By the time they were assembled, we had a full platoon—37 men led by an officer whose sidearm is the only souvenir I still retain from World War II.

I suppose the Germans figured that only a vastly superior force would have passed up the chance to open fire from what amounted to an ambush position and offer the chance to surrender instead. At any rate, Sergeant Hermann's impulse had won the day. Before my career in combat was over, I had learned enough about the two armies' respective styles of combat to recognize that this kind of initiative was rare among German troops, who usually needed an officer to prescribe every move. It was just one of the lessons from conventional warfare in Europe that later shaped my approach to irregular jungle warfare.

When the war in Europe ended in May 1945, the 3rd Armored had reached the Elbe River in Germany. Since our landing at Omaha Beach, not one day had passed without some element of the division being engaged with the enemy. In the process, I had gone from the pessimism of my early weeks in training to the feeling that I belonged to the finest combat force in world. The ragtag bunch I had joined at Indiantown Gap now thought of itself as invincible, and some of us—myself certainly included—believed we should continue the drive to the east and take care of the Soviets while we were at it.

I'm not sure why others saw the Russians as a future enemy, but a man who visited our church in Waco in late 1941 or early 1942 had made a powerful impression on me. He had been imprisoned and tortured by the Gestapo—presumably because he was Jewish—and, after his release, escaped to the Soviet Union. There he fell into the hands of the Soviet secret police, then known as the NKVD. He suffered worse torments at their hands than he had in Germany, but that was not why he feared and hated communism even more than he loathed Nazism. Hitler and his racism would never conquer the world, he said, but Soviet-controlled international communism could very well do just that. Impressionable as I may have been at that time, nothing in my postwar experience suggested that he was anything but right.

The wartime alliance still held together, however, and in the summer of 1945 the 3rd Armored Division was to be shipped to the Far East to participate in the invasion of Japan. Many of the older and married men went home to be mustered out, but the rest of us took turns going on leave while we waited for orders to ship out.

When my chance came at the end of July, I had already picked my destination. I had always wanted to see the Paris that I associated with expatriate writers such as Ernest Hemingway. Money might have been a problem—the unit had not been paid in several months, and we were all dead broke. If we lacked cash, however, we were practically afloat in cigarettes. Thanks to a free carton per man per week, a number of nonsmokers in the unit, and an armored vehicle in which to carry our surplus, we had enough tobacco to finance the R&R of every man in the platoon.

I was to travel with a friend, Corporal Loudermilk. We put our ration—20 cartons each—in a field pack and boarded a train run by the army. Once in Paris, we checked into a small hotel, also free, that was run by the Red Cross. At this point in my life, I knew something about shooting and being shot at but nothing about trafficking in contraband. I couldn't ask for lessons, however, so I went out alone on the street, lugging my field pack. I had hardly left the hotel when a Frenchman sidled up and asked if I had cigarettes. Seeing my nod, he gestured to follow him at a discreet distance.

We walked for a long way through progressively seedier neighborhoods, and I began to have visions of losing not only my cigarettes but my life just when I was supposed to be having fun. Finally, my guide turned into a decrepit neighborhood bar. I followed him into a back room, where we sat down behind a table against the wall. He told me to put the cigarettes on the bench between us, out of sight of casual observers. He counted them and offered me what I had been told in Germany was the current market price.

I accepted, and the Frenchman ordered drinks to toast the transaction. I was just 21 and had a small-town boy's fantasies of big-city vice, so I looked at the clear brandy and shuddered at the thought of being drugged and dumped in an alley. My host laughed at my hesitation—he could certainly see what I was thinking—and reached for my glass when he had finished his own. Grateful to have survived a bigger threat than combat against the Germans, I hastily departed—but not before being paid. I left with enough money to finance my stay in Paris.

I was sitting with Corporal Loudermilk at one of the innumerable sidewalk cafés when a newsboy cried out news of *la bombe atomique* that had just fallen on Hiroshima. I may have

been less surprised at this than the average GI, for, in my one semester at A&M before enlisting, I had heard a professor predict that nuclear physics would one day allow us to make “one hell of a bomb.” The news about Hiroshima proved that the professor had not overstated the case.

The Japanese surrendered before the end of our idyll in Paris, and the prospect of going home rather than into Asian combat, multiplied our delight in exploring that great city. It had not been damaged in the war, and everything—buildings, monuments, parks—exuded a seductive if slightly seedy charm. Food was still rationed, which dampened the restaurant trade, but the Red Cross had taken over the restaurant high on the Eiffel Tower, and for GIs there were no shortages of either food or champagne.

In November, the 3rd Armored Division boarded a ship for the United States and demobilization. I returned to Texas A&M, still intending to pursue a degree in geology and a career in oil exploration. Then, just before graduation in June 1950, the Korean War broke out. I had joined the army ROTC and graduated with a commission as a second lieutenant in the army. But my appetite for ground combat had declined since my eager enlistment in 1942, and I found myself looking for something that would exempt me from going to Korea.

A notice on the employment bulletin board invited applications for “intelligence work.” That sounded exciting in its own right, and I calculated that it might also keep me from being called back into the army. I noticed that the sponsoring organization was not identified, and the anonymity of the notice made it even more intriguing.

My study of geology had done little to encourage an interest in foreign affairs, and at this point I had never even heard of the Central Intelligence Agency. Nevertheless, when I went for an interview, that was what it turned out to be. After what seemed like interminable processing of my application, I reported in July to CIA Headquarters, then located on E Street in Washington, near the Lincoln Memorial.

I didn’t find out until I got there that CIA had hired me for the first class of so-called Junior Officer Trainees (JOTs), a new program designed to produce intelligence generalists and future managers. What the Agency found so attractive about A&M I never did find out, but on meeting my new colleagues I was startled to see that fully half of them had gone to school with me at College Station. Nearly all the rest were from the Ivy League.

As a product of the engineering school, I never doubted that two and two could add up to anything but four. The liberal arts major, by contrast, sometimes seemed to want the answer to be three or five if this produced what he considered a more desirable outcome. As I saw it, the engineer’s approach had the merit of discouraging wishful thinking, although colleagues with a background in the humanities may have found it merely rigid. In any case, I soon discovered that educational background affected a young officer’s prospects much less than did native affinity for the work and the flexibility that permitted adjusting to the demands of that work.

My JOT class had joined CIA at a time when a decisive confrontation with Soviet communism appeared likely if not indeed inevitable. For all trainees, this meant among other things a short—about three months—but intensive course in irregular warfare. Our instructors, a mix

of CIA and army personnel, drew their doctrine mainly from the partisan warfare supported by the Allies in Nazi-occupied Europe and Japanese-occupied Southeast Asia.

In theory, at least, every new officer would become proficient in both intelligence collection—that is, espionage—and paramilitary skills. In practice, individual preferences or simply the staffing requirements of the moment led most of us to specialize in one or the other. In my own case, the needs of the service were the determining factor; no one ever asked me whether I would rather run intelligence agents or conduct irregular warfare.

Since the closing months of World War II, I had regarded the Soviet Union as a mortal threat to my country and its freedoms. I did not, to be sure, relish the prospect of going to Korea to repeat my World War II experience of ground combat. Nevertheless, as my Agency training progressed I found myself giving less and less thought to an eventual career in geology. Fighting the undeclared war against the communists seemed glamorous, I admit, but it also seemed vitally important. Intelligence was an integral part of this conflict. I understood this in at least an abstract way, but my own impulse was to participate in the fight more directly, running paramilitary, called “PM,” operations.

Nowadays, I understand, officers negotiate their assignments abroad almost the way entertainers and athletes negotiate contracts. A very different discipline applied in the early 1950s, and beyond. In those days, assignments were determined exclusively according to a formula expressed as the “needs of the service.” Management might solicit our preferences before deciding what to do with us, but we went where we were told. Indeed, I had been asked in a pre-employment interview to rank the areas of the world in the order of my interest in them. I put Asia last, which may have made a career there inevitable.

Settling on a field assignment turned out to be more complicated than I had expected. When I finished training, I found myself on an East Asian desk in Washington, where I was told that to get overseas right away, doing the kind of paramilitary work that appealed to me, could not at the moment be done under CIA auspices. I hunted desperately for some alternative—a career as a desk officer simply unimaginable—and a sympathetic supervisor suggested work with one of the private contractors CIA then had helping prevent Soviet expansionism in the early Cold War.

Following this tip, I discovered SEA Supply, which was working as hard to fill overseas positions as I was working to find one. Management flew me to its headquarters in Miami and made me an offer on the spot. It remained only to make my departure from the Agency. Within a few days of that, in late February, I was on my way to Bangkok. I flew to New York and boarded a Scandinavian Airways flight to Stockholm. There I stayed overnight before proceeding via Frankfurt, Rome, Bombay, and New Delhi. I arrived in Bangkok on the first of March in 1951.

My abrupt departure to work for a contractor in Thailand left a bemused family back in Texas. On orders from the Agency, I had never acknowledged CIA as my employer, only that I was working for the government in Washington. The family accepted this well enough, for people in those early Cold War years readily accepted the legitimacy of government security discipline. Grandfather Lair provided the only exception to this reticence. His low regard for

“I was hoping you would get a real job.”

government and its functionaries emerged when I told him that I was headed for Washington: “I was hoping,” he said tersely, “you would get a real job.”

The sudden switch to SEA Supply, after less than a year in Washington, was another story. My inability to say, when I didn’t even know, just what I would be doing combined with the obscurity of my new employer to inspire some skepticism about the whole venture. I know that my mother, for one, did not accept at face value my claim that I had suddenly found my niche as some kind of mercenary. She never pressed me on the subject, however; she commented only that she knew it would turn into an adventure, and wished she could go along. I was so sure she was right about the impending adventure that I would cheerfully have given up half my already modest pay for the privilege of getting started on it.



Chapter 3

From “Forlorn Decrepitude” to “Fraternity”

“For it truly was (and still is) elite—not in the sense of an exclusive club that offered special entitlements but rather in the sense of a fraternity defined by its members’ readiness to learn the skills, accept the discipline, and run the risks associated with a difficult and dangerous job.”



Bangkok street scene in 1951. Lair first set foot in the city in March 1951.

I first saw Thailand in the dust and heat of the dry season. In 1951, Don Muang Airport lay about an hour’s drive from Bangkok. Fred Ferzacherly of the Miami office was visiting and had come out in local SEA Supply’s new Buick to pick me up. We headed toward the city on a two-lane asphalt road, with flame trees providing a brilliant crimson arch overhead and rice paddies stretching out on both sides.

We reached the Victory Monument in minutes. In those days it marked the edge of the city, which then had perhaps a million people (as the 20th century neared its end, there were over 12 million). Once in town, our Thai driver seemed to take the swarm of pedicabs—*samlors*—as a challenge. The heel of his hand on the horn, he raced down the left side of the street (the Thai have adopted the British practice), making this stranger from America certain a head-on collision was around the next corner. There was little other motor traffic, however, so we hurtled through town to the Pacific Hotel, a modest two-story building on Sipaya Road.

It was already evening when Fred dropped me off, saying he would pick me up in the morning. I lugged my bags up the steps and into the lobby, where I discovered that I was the only foreign guest in sight. I also discovered a dance hall, accessible through the lobby. Around its walls sat young women who—the desk clerk volunteered—would happily serve as one’s dance partner for a modest hourly fee.

The bellhop led me to my room and made a show of inspecting the light switches and water faucets before inquiring matter-of-factly if I wanted a girl. At that point, I began to wonder who had chosen my lodgings and by what criteria. I was already learning a lot. It was clear, for one thing, that no one had to go without female companionship in this country—especially if one was not too discriminating.

In any case, the Pacific Hotel was home for only a day or two. SEA Supply occupied a small compound on Soi Chidlom, not far from the US embassy. In those early days, with a complement of only five or six, we lived on the premises. Three or four were lodged in the building that housed the office, while Earnest Jefferson “Jeff” Cheek—a classmate from Texas A&M—and I occupied a small guest house in the back. Jeff had arrived a week or so after I did. He was three or four years younger than I—too young to be a World War II veteran—but SEA Supply had found him at the same time it hired me.

A farm boy from Comanche, Texas, Jeff had financial resources almost as limited as mine had been. He worked as a waiter during high school to help finance his college education. After supporting himself for a year at A&M, he received a scholarship from a program set up by Jesse Jones, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s secretary of commerce. Jones, who left school after the fourth grade, had wanted to help deserving young men reach the goal he had been denied. Financial need and a demonstrated will to succeed counted as much as grades, and Jeff was

eminently qualified—indeed, even with the partial scholarship, he worked throughout his college years.

Jeff was the Texan of movie stereotypes. He would talk to a fence post in the absence of human company, and he never met a stranger. A bit of a loose cannon, he could be uncomfortably unpredictable, but always acted with the best of intentions. The Thai loved him for his irrepressible friendliness and good nature. I could not have had a better partner in the project we were about to undertake.

Another memorable character in that first group was the local SEA Supply chief, Pete Joost. As an OSS officer, Pete had been a founder of the famous Kachin Rangers in Burma during World War II. He knew the ways of Southeast Asia, and he saved Jeff and me from many an embarrassment with his hints about the way to get things done without giving offense to our hosts.

By the time I arrived in Bangkok, the Thai had already decided to use the National Police as the locus of their program to resist communist expansion. They could have used the army, whose training and equipment were more compatible with guerrilla warfare, but the army was concentrated in its own garrisons and thus insulated from any working contact with the population at large. The heart of a resistance effort needed to be an organization hidden in the civilian population, and the police, deployed in small detachments throughout the country, worked among that population. Putting first things first, the Thai chose the police and counted on the United States for logistical and training support.

The Thai wanted a training site sufficiently isolated to be inconspicuous but close enough to military facilities to be able to draw on the military for support. They found what they wanted at Lop Buri, a major garrison town 90 miles north of Bangkok. There, the three buildings of an abandoned Japanese military installation outside town looked sound enough to be renovated.

Jeff Cheek and I took two Thai police colonels up to Lop Buri to inspect the proposed camp. We traveled by C-47, the military version of the old DC-3 twin-engine passenger carrier. Despite its deceptively rickety exterior, the C-47 was perhaps the most reliable aircraft ever built, and it became the workhorse of Civil Air Transport (CAT), the airline created after World War II by the flamboyant Air Corps General Claire Chennault.

We touched down on the cracked, weed-covered concrete of the old Japanese airstrip. The buildings, completely overgrown with bamboo, were equally dilapidated. Jeff and I and the colonels fought our way through the vegetation to examine them and agreed that, despite their desolate appearance, they would do. There were, of course, no power and no water; here as elsewhere, we would have to improvise.

We could not count on the C-47 for every run between Bangkok and our new camp, so Pete told us to find a used vehicle capable of negotiating the rough laterite road to Lop Buri. Thailand had not yet recovered from the privations of World War II under the Japanese, and the selection was sparse. We finally found something with four-wheel drive, an old three-quarter-ton US army weapons carrier—like a big pickup truck—that stood in forlorn decrepitude

on a used-vehicle lot. For this doubtful conveyance we paid, I think, about \$1,500, including the substantial premium imposed on any Western customer. Like true innocents abroad, we threw our duffel bags in the back and, having not a word of Thai between us, headed north.

For three hours or so, the language deficit didn't matter. Then, suddenly, the ancient engine coughed and died. At the side of the road, with no human habitation and not another car or truck in sight, we set about trying to coax the thing back to life. After some minutes of this, two Thai men, doubtless farmers, emerged from the trees and squatted amiably to watch. As we perspired under the hood, they were joined by other villagers; the audience eventually swelled to two dozen or so. An old woman appeared, carrying a little food stand with its charcoal brazier, and set up shop. Having now missed lunch in Lop Buri, we happily bought her special of the day, strips of grilled pork called *satay*, served with semi-glutinous rice.

Lunch over, we resumed entertaining the villagers with our sweaty frustration. Finally, with the carburetor or gas line flushed—I forget which had caused the problem—we rolled off in a cloud of oil smoke, pursued by a lusty cheer.

We had not yet, as it turned out, heard the last of the day's applause. As darkness fell, we pulled into Lop Buri. At the roadside restaurant familiar from our earlier visit with the police colonels, we were handed menus in undecipherable Thai script. One of a group of young men at the next table came to our rescue when he invited us to sit with them while he translated. They were all army officers stationed at the local garrison, and they seemed to welcome the novelty of foreign company.

Singha beer (one of the world's great brews) flowed, the party got merrier, and our hosts began to sing. As we might have expected, we were soon required to participate. Jeff and I had just one number in common, namely, the A&M football fight song, and that is what we gave them. The ovation that followed owed more to good fellowship than it did to our artistry, but we seemed to be off to a congenial start as residents of Lop Buri.

The 30 laborers hired at our first visit to clear bamboo and underbrush were still at the camp when we arrived. They formed the third audience in what had already been a socially eventful day. This performance was entirely inadvertent. While the camp lacked running water, there were several cisterns—400-gallon water tanks into which rainwater was channeled—and Jeff and I were ripe for a bath.

Having set up cots and mosquito nets, we filled buckets of water from a cistern and proceeded to bathe outside the building serving as our new home. In our innocence, we did not know that Thai men do not disrobe before other men, and we soon drew a crowd. Jeff was the main attraction: at about six feet three inches and 230 pounds, he was certainly the largest human being these provincial Thai had ever seen. His light red hair was accompanied by a pale, freckled complexion; in the light of our kerosene lanterns, his skin glowed a bright pink.

This audience was polite enough not to applaud but did not hide its amusement. Most of the laborers stayed on with us to take care of camp maintenance, and later, when Jeff had established that he could take a kidding, they let him know that he had been christened *chang puak*, that is, the albino water buffalo.

The glamour of covert action had certainly been part of the attraction when I joined CIA, and I had expected pretty much the same kind of excitement when I went to work for SEA Supply. My first months in Thailand were a whole lot sweatier than they were glamorous, however. Supervising the laborers meant working alongside them as we cleaned and repaired the permanent buildings and constructed an open-sided shelter for the classroom. No air conditioning, no flush toilets—just privies—and no hot water.

Even before we got the facility in usable shape, two training officers joined us. Ray Babineau and Walter Kuzmuk had both served in the OSS, and Walter had parachuted into Northern Thailand during the war. With Ray as senior adviser and intelligence collection expert, they prepared lesson plans while Jeff and I supervised the construction work. It was a reasonable division of labor, but we suspected they did not mind letting their seniority keep them out of the searing tropical sun. In the relative comfort of the shade, they could work and drink Singha beer at the same time.

General Donovan had recruited his people from an enormous range of professional backgrounds, and Walter had entered the OSS with experience as a hotel administrator. We came to value him as much for his ability to create a competent and well-stocked kitchen as for his skill as an instructor in irregular warfare.

We wanted everyone in the proposed stay-behind organization to be fully jump-qualified. If the Chinese should overrun the country and we could support the resistance only from outside the country, the ability to drop people into their operating areas would acquire crucial importance. We called on SEA Supply for help, and within a few weeks—bureaucratic personnel administration had not then become the norm—an old paramilitary hand named Lew showed up to give us a hand.

Lew began by hiring a Thai contractor to build a 34-foot tower that could be used to simulate an actual parachute jump. Wearing a parachute harness attached to a cable, a trainee would leap from the tower, falling a distance equivalent to the length of the static line that opens a military chute once the jumper is clear of the aircraft. Lew also built a mock-up of a C-47 fuselage for use in teaching pre-jump procedure. He gave all the commands in English, illustrated with gestures and demonstration; it worked so well that Thai jump-training instructors issue their commands in English, even today.

When the first class arrived in May 1951, Jeff was still pink and freckled, but I was almost as brown as any of the Thai. The transition to training mode did not get us out of the sun as we found ourselves supervising the bulk of the field exercises. We may have lacked the rich experience of our more senior colleagues, but our recent PM training meant that our skills were fresh and well adapted to teaching by demonstration. Ray and Walter, although expert at the theoretical level, were a little rusty in practice and, perhaps, a little out of shape. So, the two neophytes took on most of the work at the firing range and demolitions area and on the map reading course. Jeff and I also joined the Thai staff in physical training and ran the obstacle course with them and the students; here too, our older colleagues were content to observe and supervise.

Unlike its neighbors, none of them more than nominally independent, Thailand harbored no serious communist-led insurgency. Even the endemic problem of corruption, while far

from trivial, constituted no threat to the legitimacy of the constitutional system. Nevertheless, we thought it important that our trainees understand not only how to resist a communist regime, but why it was so vitally important to do so.

Accordingly, we added a unit of instruction on the predatory nature of international communism and how Thailand would fare under Chinese domination. Basing course content on lectures we had heard at the Suitland estate, we tried to convey the lessons in a manner commensurate with the modest educational level of most of our trainees. Despite the subject's importance, we feared that such theoretical fare would bore them. In fact, the instruction on communism seemed to serve as a significant motivator. The students' responses to it suggested that they did in fact see a fundamental conflict between the tenets of Soviet and Chinese communism and the survival of Thai independence.

General Phao had made good on his promise to give single young men at least a high-school diploma. Forty-eight were police privates, just out of basic training, and two were second lieutenants fresh from the Thai Military Academy.

General Phao's choice as camp commander, Captain Suchart, was an amiable and competent administrator who expressed no desire for an active part in planning and conducting training. Instead, he concentrated on liaison with the Thai officials whose cooperation we needed to conduct training outside our own installation. Success at this required a sure hand with turf-conscious functionaries, and Suchart had just the right touch; his deft handling turned the provincial governor into a solid friend and occasional visitor.

This division of labor left the Americans in charge of training as the program got under way. As our purpose was to help the Thai create and run their own program, however, we could not let ourselves become the permanent training element. We were already planning to build an instructor cadre with the best of our first class, but it had to have competent, committed leadership. Salvation came in the person of one of the two young lieutenants, Saneh Sittiphan, who from the beginning displayed an impressive combination of energy, good judgment, and interest in the program. He became the *de facto* Thai chief of training, a status that appeared to cause Suchart not the least distress. When Suchart left at the end of the first year, Saneh replaced him. Over the years, Saneh's police superiors consistently shared our initial judgment, and he ended his career as deputy director general, earning a fourth star before his retirement.

In 1951, all that lay ahead of him. Even as the greenest of lieutenants, however, he readily endorsed, on his own authority, my proposal to ignore all differences of rank among students and treat them as equals. There would be instructors and students, but no other distinctions. This protocol was easily applied to the first class, almost exclusively privates, but Saneh saw its promise for future training cycles, when it would help establish the authority of instructors junior in rank to many of their students.

Jeff and I—our older colleagues did not join us—set out to reinforce this collegial style, joining the trainees for their morning run and other physical conditioning exercises. Saneh also took care to meet any requirements levied on the other students. He broke a foot in an

early parachute jump but, after only a few weeks of recuperation, insisted on making the remaining qualifying jumps in order to graduate with the class.

As should now be obvious, the facilities given us by General Phao were Spartan even by Thai standards. Despite his assurances of commitment to the program, this made me wonder whether he really had any more than a casual interest in it. My concern was allayed by the extraordinary quality of the first class. It is not merely nostalgia that makes me recall them as a really superior group. A surprising number defied the prevailing lack of upward mobility in Thai society to become officers and rise to positions of real authority.

At least six reached flag rank, an unprecedented achievement in Thailand's traditional, hierarchical society. A seventh, Tawin Plengvanit, was killed in a road accident while still a youthful full colonel. He had already earned a great reputation in the Provincial Police for cleaning up districts infested with communist terrorists and bandits who colluded with local politicians. Tawin led from the front, not the rear, and became a legend for his participation in no-quarter-given gun battles with numerically superior bandit gangs. At his funeral, national television showed Director General of Police Phao kissing his cheek in a gesture hardly ever bestowed on anyone outside one's immediate family.

Another, Dachar Adulrat, was killed in Laos trying to save the life of an American pilot. He became so renowned for his heroism that, after his death, the King commissioned a motion picture commemorating his life.

In these men and others, I had seen great potential even in the initial phases of training. In my early months at Lop Buri, I chose six instructors from among the students. Dachar was chief instructor, while Tawin, Somboon Srivanit, Chert Chamrat, and Piyom became group leaders. Their self-abnegating devotion to country is reflected in a brutal statistic: four of the five died in the line of duty.

Despite our trainees' youth and inexperience, the collegial atmosphere at Lop Buri allowed them to exercise individual initiative. The result was that, no matter how low their rank or modest their social origins, they learned to think independently and have confidence in their own judgment. General Phao certainly did a good job in selecting these men, but I am inclined to think that, as leaders and heroes, they were made, not born. In other words, our expectations of them encouraged them—even required them, if they were going to stay with us—to develop exceptional skills. At the same time, they learned to put the unit and its mission ahead of personal advantage or even survival. This enabled them to lead men who were nominally their superiors.

Combat in Europe had shaped my convictions not only about leadership by merit but also about such things as training priorities. On at least one issue, we instructors were unanimous: guerrillas had to be able to operate at night, using darkness to their advantage. Accordingly, we set up a two-day exercise designed to build confidence at night and simultaneously teach something about eliciting the help of friendly villagers.

After dark, the entire unit headed west toward the Chao Phraya River, the only major terrain obstacle before our objective some six miles beyond. Avoiding roads and villages, we

spent most of the night making our way to the river. There we found concealment, placed sentinels, and prepared to rest through the day.

Only two of us ventured out of the bivouac. One was a police private engaged to a girl living in the nearest village. The other was Dachar Adulrat, the only Muslim policeman in the group. Dachar was a man of unusual intellectual curiosity—he was a self-taught student of comparative religion, among other things—and extraordinary leadership ability.

Dachar and the local girl’s fiancé headed for her house. To replicate the challenge facing real guerrillas, they had to persuade her father surreptitiously to lead them to a friend who owned a boat suitable for crossing the river. The friend was away from home, but the group somehow found a self-described “assistant owner” who agreed to serve as ferryman. Once across the Chao Phraya, it took us another night to reach our “target,” an open-sided, thatched-roof community center called a *sala*. We finished the exercise by staging a mock raid on the building. The village chief, briefed in advance, had been promised we would respect the property. As we headed back to Lop Buri, no one was yet an accomplished night infiltrator, but we had made a start.

Parachute training capped the program of instruction, and we experienced our first near-fatality on an early training jump. None of our equipment was new, and the canopies of our obsolete T-7 parachutes tended to open while still in the slipstream of the aircraft, creating a variety of risks. Prasert Kwangkaeo made too weak an exit from the C-47, and his chute failed to clear the airplane. Instead, the canopy or one of the risers caught on the tail wheel, and Prasert was yanked almost horizontally into the plane’s slipstream.

The training drill had taken this danger into account, and Prasert remembered what to do: he pulled the ripcord of his reserve chute. There were no guarantees that this last-ditch expedient would work, but the sudden braking effect did in fact tear him loose from the aircraft. I had been watching from the drop zone and saw him land in what looked like the prescribed way, with knees bent. The immense force of the reserve chute’s opening could itself inflict grave injury, however, and I raced over with the rest of the ground team to check his condition. Lying inert, Prasert sat up when we approached, rubbed his eyes as if awaking from sleep, and reassured us with an all-purpose Thai exclamation that in this case meant “not to worry!”

Our first graduation ceremony attracted the two Thai officials who were to exercise the greatest influence on my career: General Phao and General Sarit Thanarat, then commander of the Thai First army. Both were able, ambitious, and charismatic leaders. My friends at Lop Buri summed up their relationship by observing that one cannot keep two tigers in the same cage. Although they had not yet reached the apex of their respective careers—or their rivalry—we at Lop Buri happily basked in their attention.

We counted it as a great success that we had finished the course without losing a single student to accident, sickness, incapacity, or insufficient motivation. In the single most important decision for the future of my efforts in Thailand, General Phao allowed us to keep the 10 best graduates as the core of our permanent training cadre. Lieutenant Saneh became camp commandant, while the other 40 graduates returned to their respective districts. (A Thai district roughly corresponds to an American county; unlike many US counties, however, the district represents a major center of local government.)

Either because of General Phao's sponsorship or the American connection or a sense of urgency about the threat from China or a mixture of these, our stay-behind course quickly became the rage in the Thai security establishment. In its second year, half the student body came from the military services. Because the course was consistently oversubscribed, we could demand high-quality students. Phao let us keep the most promising police privates among them to build our instructor cadre; in this way, we gradually brought the complement to 50.

One class, in late 1952, was composed of assistant district officers, civilian officials who reported to the Ministry of Interior. Many of these went on to become provincial governors and senior officials in the ministry. Together with the students from the military, they provided me and the Thai staff with an enormous range of contacts throughout the entire Thai security establishment, uniformed and civilian.

In the early months, when I was still unfamiliar with the Thai way of doing things, I saw the political system as more volatile than it really was. Early one Sunday morning, half-listening to the BBC shortwave news broadcast, I snapped alert when the announcer began talking about a coup d'état in Bangkok. I rushed out of my room, but the only Thai colleague I could find was the camp doctor, and he was still sound asleep. I jostled him awake: "Doc, there's a revolution going on in Bangkok!"

He looked at me, sleepy and slightly annoyed, and said, "Oh, Bill, they're always doing that!" and he rolled over and went back to sleep. It later developed that we were witnessing the so-called "Navy coup," an abortive effort to bring back ex-Prime Minister Pridi. Its instructive value for me lay mainly in the doctor's advice not to overreact to political maneuvering.

It was another Sunday morning, a steamy one, and I was sleeping late. Covered only by my shorts and the mosquito net hanging over my cot, I was awakened by the sound of steps on the open stairway leading up to the loft where I lay hoping to catch any vagrant breeze. A Thai gentleman, unknown to me but clearly a figure of considerable authority, appeared at the head of the stairs, and I scrambled to make myself halfway presentable.

Everyone else was off on some errand. The visitor introduced himself as Prime Minister Pibul. He had stopped by, he said, simply to greet the American advisers to the stay-behind program. He lingered long enough for an amiable chat about my adaptation to life in the Thai countryside. Then, as casually as he had arrived, he left for the weekend house maintained for him at Lop Buri by the headquarters of the army's artillery branch, in which he had served during his military career.

We attracted some other distinguished visitors, among them General—and at this point ambassador—William Donovan, who had replaced Edwin Stanton in 1951. President Truman probably wanted both to mollify Donovan, after rejecting the general's bid to head CIA, and signal American warmth toward the Pibul government. Whatever his reasons, the president gave Donovan a memorable year in Bangkok. The new ambassador reveled in his image as the savior of Thai dignity and national independence, as well as his association with OSS veterans and Free Thai members at all levels.

Donovan visited us several times at Lop Buri, regaling us with OSS reminiscences. He joked that the camp kitchen offered the finest cuisine in the country, but it was clearly nostalgia that brought him back—nostalgia and perhaps also the wide-eyed respect of junior officers like me. As I grew up during the interwar years, I had idolized him as Medal of Honor recipient and hero of the film *The Fighting 69th*.

During another visit, this one to North Thailand, Donovan had the chance to display his genius for inspiring personal loyalty. The ambassador included the Lop Buri camp staff on the list of Americans invited to accompany him on his first trip to Chiang Mai, and we witnessed his performance.

At one point, the former Free Thai leader for that region brought his son over to greet Walter Kuzmuk, for whom the boy had served as interpreter when Walter jumped into Thailand on an OSS mission during the war. Listening to their conversation, I learned that, at war’s end, OSS had offered to reward this Free Thai leader for his heroic service in the joint cause. The old man promptly asked for an American university education for his son. The boy—Soonthorn—flew to the United States in a B-29 bomber and eventually graduated from the University of Illinois with a degree in civil engineering.

At some point during his stay in the United States, Soonthorn had been introduced to Donovan. Now, at the reception in Chiang Mai, he wanted to pay his respects, but he feared that the great man would be embarrassed if forced to try to recall anything about him. Walter dismissed his concern and marched him up to Donovan, who, without waiting for an introduction, called Soonthorn by name, warmly shook his hand, and thanked him for his OSS service. Soonthorn and I had many dealings in later years, and I know his life was as eventful as mine. I also know that this encounter is one he never forgot.

I suspect that, as ambassador, Donovan was considerably more popular with us in SEA Supply and with the Thai than with his own Foreign Service staff. To begin with, he had announced his assignment in his characteristically antibureaucratic fashion. While the embassy waited for the State Department to announce a new ambassador, Donovan wired news of his confirmation to Willis Bird, the OSS veteran in Bangkok. Willis, a Donovan favorite during the war, had married one of the eight sisters of Sitthi Savetsila (and was therefore my future brother-in-law). The general must have known of Willis’s continuing Free Thai connections and chosen him in order to let old Free Thai friends be the first to know. Willis happily obliged him. He also delivered the message to the embassy, surely knowing that this would enrage a staff already ill-disposed toward him for his role, entirely outside diplomatic channels, in the Free Thai approach to Washington in 1950.

Before the end of Donovan’s brief tour in Bangkok, I became the senior SEA Supply representative at Lop Buri. Babineau and Kuzmuk had left. Jeff and I were joined, early in the second year, by Jack Shirley, a burly, quiet-spoken native of Maine who became the third member of the American staff at Hua Hin. Over the course of the years I came to know him as a devoted consumer of Singha beer and one of the coolest and most selflessly courageous men I ever met.



The management style of the era put a premium on working-level autonomy and personal initiative, and this probably accounts for the rarity of my contacts with management in Bangkok. When I did visit, it was not to get instructions, for I was expected to set my own agenda, within policy limits, and solve my own problems. I would just summarize what I was doing, submit my accountings, and draw funds for camp operations.

I had spent much of the first year working on the concept for what became the Hua Hin project, and Shirley joined Jeff, Saneh, and me in refining the proposal. My new status as a captain in their police enhanced my authority with the Thai, but it also put a burden on me to come up with solutions to problems. One early problem posed a challenge to the program's integrity.

The growing popularity of the course attracted a few students whose purpose was to get a career-enhancing ticket punched at a minimum of personal inconvenience. One evening at the beginning of a training cycle, the highest-ranking student, a police major, decided to leave camp for whatever night life he could find in town. When instructor Somboon—like the others, a police private—pointed out that this contravened camp rules, the major accused him of insubordination and stormed into Saneh's office demanding that he be fired. I was in Bangkok on an errand, and, when I got back, the instructor was already gone. The well-connected major had intimidated Saneh into removing him.

It seemed to me that even an occasional abuse of this kind threatened to degrade our program into a resumé-enhancing exercise. Such a precedent could only erode the authority of our instructors, whose youth and low rank made their work challenging enough. Saneh was no happier than I with the major's comportment, but he feared—probably with reason—the consequences of defying him.

This became the first occasion—but far from the last—on which my Thai colleagues and I exploited the ambiguities of our separate command lines to get done what we jointly believed needed doing. Two factors came into play. On one hand, I was not in the police chain of command, so no retaliation by the major could affect me. On the other, however, was my designation—by Phao's order—as chief of training. Thus my signature, along with that of the camp commander, was required for every graduation certificate.

The solution was obvious: Saneh informed the major—I suspect through an intermediary—that his breach of camp discipline, if not corrected, would make it impossible for me to certify his graduation. He also pointed out that I would feel obliged to notify General Phao of the basis for my decision. The major backed down, we recalled the banished instructor, and the threat to good order evaporated. One gratifying side effect of this confrontation was an even more cordial and cooperative relationship with Saneh.

I had fully intended to make good on my threat to communicate directly with General Phao, for I had no doubt of his readiness to defy his minions' family and political connections on a point of principle. Nevertheless, the fact remained that Phao's operating style displayed—at least from my perspective—strangely contradictory aspects. On one hand, he was reportedly not averse to accepting substantial favors from, say, businessmen seeking police contracts.

On the other, he was clearly dedicated to ensuring the integrity and competence of his policemen, and he countenanced no departures from sound professional practice.

If Phao saw any inconsistency in this, he resolved it by distributing the bulk of the gratuities down through the ranks, supplementing the low pay that would otherwise encourage extortion and bribery at the working level. It was hardly an ideal way to run a police force, but it was a great deal better than the epidemic of corruption that erupted in later years and eroded the even-handed enforcement of the law all the way down to the traffic cop and the policeman walking his beat.

Whatever his flaws, Phao had enormous impact on the National Police, raising its level of competence with improvements that are still in effect. More than 40 years after his departure, his portrait hangs in police stations all over the country.



At Lop Buri, we were isolated from other Thai police and military programs. When I got an occasional glimpse of some other activity, no one offered me any explanation of its purpose. We had been in business for only about six months when one of my Bangkok superiors sent me two young Germans with instructions to put them through our paramilitary training regimen. The Thai had no problem with this; in return for its material and advisory support, SEA Supply was free to make occasional use of camp facilities.

Neither Heinz nor Lothar spoke much English, but, as we put them through fitness and skills training, they managed to convey something of their checkered background. In trouble with the German police, they had joined the French Foreign Legion to stay out of jail. After being sent to Vietnam, they discovered they didn't much like fighting the Viet Minh. They deserted and made their way overland across Laos, eventually arriving in Thailand.

Heinz and Lothar needed more attention than I would have expected professional soldiers to require, but they displayed a workmanlike attitude and absorbed the training material pretty well. They were very good at one thing: they could keep their mouths shut about the operational assignment for which we were preparing them. At the end of their program, I still knew nothing about their proposed tasking. It didn't matter as long as I was teaching them the right skills, and I could only hope that I was. In due course, I took them back to Bangkok and forgot about them.

About a year later, the English-language *Bangkok Post* reported that Burmese security forces had killed an American working with a bandit gang accused of opium smuggling. A photograph of the supposed American—not of the corpse but from an identity document of some kind—displayed the face of our onetime trainee, Heinz. Shortly thereafter, one of our instructors encountered Lothar on the street in Bangkok. Lothar was now a mechanic at the Mercedes-Benz dealership there; he and Heinz had long since parted ways, and he knew nothing, he said, of Heinz's whereabouts. I could only conclude that, whatever SEA Supply in Bangkok had had in mind for this pair, it had cut them loose, and they had found different ways to try to make it on their own.

The episode reflected the spirit of the times in a way that kept us from giving it more than passing attention. Security programs designed to keep Thailand out of the Chinese orbit attracted adventurers of practically every nationality. They flocked to Bangkok in search of excitement and a few easy American dollars.

Many of these drifters gathered at Chez Eve, a restaurant and night club catering to Europeans in Bangkok. Well before midnight, the air would be thick with tobacco smoke gently stirred by the giant ceiling fans. The dance floor would seethe with oddly matched couples of delicately formed Thai courtesans and their Western partners, giants by comparison, as they swayed to the slow, sentimental music of Filipino musicians.

Chez Eve had more to offer than a steamy atmosphere of casual sex, however. The owner, a Hungarian refugee named Nick Jerow, maintained the best European kitchen in Bangkok. Somsak, his Thai manager, was both an immensely ingratiating host and the foremost judo practitioner in Thailand—he came to Lop Buri once a week to instruct our trainees. With Somsak to keep things under control, Nick's guests could expect a good time without any threat of mayhem from other merrymakers. This combination of attractions made the club an entertainment mecca, and, when he tired of its demands on his time, Nick had no trouble finding a consortium to take it off his hands. General Phao and the local CIA office each bought a quarter-interest, it was rumored, and Somsak the other half.

Phao and Somsak presumably had nothing in mind but profit. What the CIA purpose might have been I cannot say. It presumably would have involved some kind of operational opportunity, as under US government rules any profits would have had to be returned to the US Treasury.

In any case, while the new owners may have been content with the arrangement, Nick fell on evil times. At one point, he was reduced to running the badger game with a Hungarian woman. She would seduce a foreign tourist into taking her to his room, whereupon Nick, posing as jealous husband, would break in and demand money. Nick's checkered career did not prevent him from being accepted at Bangkok's establishment watering hole, the Sports Club, where he became the only member registered as a stateless person. He survived the con game episode—I don't know about his partner—and bounced back with a new restaurant called Nick's Number One. More staid in tone than Chez Eve, it quickly became the top European-style eatery in Bangkok.

Meanwhile, Chez Eve remained the nightclub favored by Americans in Bangkok, especially by CAT aircrews. In the early 1950s, the United States still harbored dreams of a successful anti-communist revolt in China. To that end, Washington supported remnants of Nationalist Chinese armies that had been driven into the northern mountains of Burma in 1949. Supply flights for those elements needed "kickers," the men who pushed the supplies out the cargo doors of the old twin-engine C-46s and C-47s used for these missions. In the swashbuckling atmosphere of the time, pilots needing help would simply make the rounds of the clientele at Chez Eve. I would hear their casual solicitations, "Hey, want to come along tomorrow?"

In 1952, with US encouragement, the Nationalists invaded southern China, but the Red army gave them a summary thrashing, and they fled back to their refuge in northern Burma. The United States desperately wanted to retrieve its advisers, who had been furnished by CIA, but the Nationalist bivouac in the mountains lacked an airstrip. Rescue could take place only by helicopter, and the only helicopters in the area belonged to the Royal Thai Air Force.

There were just two of these, H-19s recently delivered by the United States, and Washington sent two people out to Bangkok to persuade the Thai to lend us one of them. That was not all. Washington not only wanted an aircraft but for some reason insisted on using an American pilot. The visitors therefore had the delicate task of communicating to the Thai that it had to be an all-American show. I happened to be in Bangkok at the time and was asked to join them as the American best acquainted with Sitthi Savetsila at Thai Air Force Headquarters. I remember our collective discomfort.

Sitthi reacted to the proposal with his usual aplomb and promised to get us a prompt reply. I would have been surprised had the Thai turned us down on the aircraft, but I wondered how they would react to the condition that an American pilot fly it. Maybe they were relieved not to have any of their own people violating Burmese air space, for Sitthi quickly obtained Thai government agreement: we could have the chopper and choose our own pilot.

Therein lay the rub. CAT had no fully qualified helicopter pilots. The eventual choice, Eric Schilling, was an excellent fixed-wing pilot but had only modest experience with helicopters. He was the best we had, however, so we sent him to the air base at Don Muang Airport outside Bangkok for a check ride.

Everything went fine down at sea level, but the intended landing pad lay high in the mountains near the Chinese border. There, Eric discovered that he had bitten off a little more than he could chew. Trying to take off in the thin air at that high elevation, and probably overloaded as well, he managed to get the aircraft off the ground. While backing up to get enough room to clear the landing pad, however, he dropped the tail and the tail rotor hit the ground.

No one was hurt in the ensuing crash, but the rotor was beyond repair. We eventually got word of this through the adviser's radio channel but then found that the Thai lacked spare parts. Washington flew a tail rotor assembly to Bangkok, and we dropped it by parachute to the party stranded in the mountains. Eric and his crew chief got the rotor installed. The air was still thin, however, and the second attempt had the same result: rearward maneuver, tail rotor contact with the ground, and helicopter out of commission. The group gave up on air evacuation, burned the useless helicopter, and set off on foot.

We now owed the Thai Air Force a helicopter and still didn't have our people out. A week or so later, the two advisers, the air crew, and their Chinese escort straggled into a Thai post on the border with Burma and were flown to Lop Buri. We drove the Americans to Bangkok, where the embassy took charge of getting them back to the States.

I later gathered CIA had not shared whatever euphoria the advisers may have felt upon getting back to civilization. An Agency man later told me, rather gratuitously I thought, that both of them had become opium addicts during their service with the Chinese. Looking

back, I suspect it may have been the poisonous relationship between the intelligence-oriented Office of Special Operations and the covert-action arm, the Office of Policy Coordination, that provoked this calumny. The two branches were not unified until late 1952, when Director of Central Intelligence Gen. Walter Bedell Smith combined them into the Directorate of Plans.



In the year and a half following my arrival in Thailand, invasion fears receded as the stalemate persisted in Korea and the Chinese abstained from any other overt aggression. This was certainly not accompanied by any relaxation of Cold War tensions, however. I shared the perception, universally accepted in the US foreign policy establishment, that there existed an insatiably ambitious global communist monolith. I also shared the assumption that, where military weakness or fear of US retaliation inhibited armed action, the communists would turn to subversion and guerrilla warfare. Neither the Thai government nor US intelligence thought Thailand could expect immunity from the inherently expansionist program that flowed from a doctrine of worldwide revolution.

My Thai colleagues and I spent many evening hours at Lop Buri discussing the threat to their country's security and looking for a strategy to respond to it. Major aspects of such a response were far beyond our competence or responsibility, so we did not even discuss, for example, the ideal size and structure of the armed forces. It nevertheless seemed to all of us that the most likely prospect was a protracted, low-level conflict. The security of Thailand's borders would be continuously tested by the Chinese or their surrogates. This test would come, not by overt invasion, but surreptitiously, with political subversion and perhaps small, armed incursions—all intended to challenge the Thai government's sovereignty over its own territory and people.

As we saw it, there were two places this covert aggression might target. The first was the lightly populated area in the forbidding mountains that straddled the borders with Burma and Laos in the north. There, the enemy would aim at enlisting or intimidating tribal peoples, many of them semi-nomadic. These peoples felt no identification with any national government and were concerned only with preserving their autonomy. Unable to establish a secure territorial base, they were vulnerable to manipulation by any local power seeking to weaken a neighbor.

The second potential target, the border region adjacent to Southern Laos, presented a security problem that was just the opposite of the threat in the northern mountains. In northeast Thailand, across the Mekong River from Laos, there were no physical obstacles to government access and control, and the people, while speaking a dialect distinct from that of Bangkok, were incontestably Thai. The problem was that their language and culture were even more similar to those of their Lao neighbors across the river.

These similarities constituted a two-edged national security sword. Although they would facilitate covert Thai entry into the war in Laos in the mid-1960s, they could also be used to communist advantage in any effort to subvert Bangkok's control of the northeast.

Left to themselves, the Lao posed no threat. French military fortunes were steadily declining in Indochina, however, and the final humiliation at the battle of Dien Bien Phu was only a year and a half away. As early as 1952, it seemed to me that the charismatic Ho Chi Minh and his communist-led movement would eventually win control of Vietnam. A Vietnamese communist regime could be expected to turn Laos into a surrogate, and this would put Thailand in serious danger.

For me then, the key challenge was to determine how the capabilities we were developing in Lop Buri could be applied to strengthen Bangkok's resistance to covert aggressions in two very different environments. I expected that experience to go for naught if our instructor cadre were dispersed, and I found Saneh and the others in full agreement. The answer was obvious enough: convert our training staff into the core of a small, highly proficient, intelligence and intervention unit capable of monitoring and responding to incipient external threats to Thai security. We had in mind not only direct action against Thailand but also the dangers posed by internal problems in neighboring countries, especially in fragile Laos.

The rigidity of the Thai bureaucracy and local budgetary constraints made it unlikely that this would occur without US participation, but I was still a junior member of the US security contingent in Bangkok, and the prospect that I might exercise enough influence on the chief, let alone on his superiors back in the States, to get something like this approved seemed dim at best.

One evening, I explained the concept to an army attaché, Lt. Col. Jerry Davis, who came up from Bangkok occasionally to make training jumps with us. Maybe I would have proceeded anyway, for the only alternative was to see the unit dissolved. Davis's enthusiasm for the idea ended my vacillation, however, and I made a special run to Bangkok to deliver my proposal for a special border security unit.

The plan called for continuous surveillance of sensitive border areas and prompt police action against communist-sponsored subversion. The unit would also—this would be more a Thai than an American concern—reinforce police outposts, especially along the northern sector of the Burmese border, that were subject to attack by bandit gangs operating across national boundaries.

I emphasized that, if Washington approved and accepted the proposal, the Thai would need to provide the bulk of the program's resources: personnel, real estate, weapons, and ground transportation. The Americans would provide only advisory help, ordnance and parachutes, communications gear, and 40 hours a month of C-47 time. The US contribution to operating costs would not exceed \$80,000 a year (and through the rest of the 1950s it never did).

After waiting for several weeks and nearing the edge of despair, I was abruptly summoned to Bangkok. Pete Joost, I knew, had endorsed the idea, and so had the embassy people concerned with internal security matters. Final approval could come only from Washington, however, and, once the suspense was over, I realized that action there had proceeded with admirable speed.

Washington advised that, if the Thai were interested enough to provide personnel and camp facilities, the United States would furnish the resources I had discussed with them. The whole thing might easily have been dismissed as a quixotic fantasy, for there must have been some in Washington—perhaps even in Bangkok—who doubted the practicality of joint management under terms left undefined. Be that as it may, it was my now my job to turn my vision into reality. The thrill of winning an Olympic gold could not have exceeded the intensity of my gratification at the outcome.

My delight was tempered by the knowledge that approval from Washington did not guarantee a similar response from the Thai. Although I was confident that the Thai government wanted to preserve the integrity of the Lop Buri cadre, I recognized that sympathetic interest was one thing and allocating funds and personnel quite another. Our next move would be an approach to General Phao—the one described at the beginning of this account—and I assumed that protocol would require my boss in Bangkok to handle this in person.

The problem was that he was having trouble getting the general to return his phone calls. I never found out just why, but I knew that the prickly general was not to be intimidated by the fact of Thai dependence on American aid. Anyone, Thai or American, who violated his sense of propriety would pay a price. So, after a week of fruitless calls, the Bangkok office sent a message to Lop Buri telling me to try to see Phao myself.

I invented some pretext for my own superiors' inability to get into General Phao's office and suggested to Saneh—a captain, at this point—that he go through police channels to get an appointment for us. He readily agreed to try but said that he could not breach the chain of command by going to Phao over the heads of officers at intermediate levels. I would have to make our pitch by myself. Saneh did not, as best I recall, specify our agenda in his message to Phao, but he vigorously endorsed my request for a meeting.

Just as I never determined why my boss couldn't get in to see Phao, I don't really know why I did. In strict protocol terms, my rank was even lower than Saneh's, and Phao's unavailability to Americans very senior to me suggested that, at this moment, he felt no obligation to be accommodating. The general and I had met at the opening of the Lop Buri program and at graduation exercises, however, and I think he liked the way in which Jeff and I had accepted the living and working conditions of our Thai colleagues. The fact that the well-regarded Saneh had urged Phao to see me can hardly have hurt.

Whatever his reasons, Phao acceded, and the ensuing encounter with him set the direction of the rest of my professional life. I would go on to learn the country and the language and acquire a Thai family. As the struggle against the communists in Indochina evoked an increasingly massive US commitment, I would find myself the working partner of the Thai who managed their country's participation in the war in Laos. Finally, I would wind up as the field manager of the largest paramilitary operation ever undertaken by CIA. In that capacity, I would support and guide the Hmong tribesmen in their courageous but ultimately doomed resistance to the North Vietnamese army.

Eventful as such a career had to be, the greatest satisfaction in it came from my role in the creation of the elite Thai police unit, first known as the Airborne Royal Guard and later called

the Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU). For it truly was (and still is) elite—not in the sense of an exclusive club that offered special entitlements but rather in the sense of a fraternity defined by its members’ readiness to learn the skills, accept the discipline, and run the risks associated with a difficult and dangerous job. Telling the story of these men is one of the main purposes of this memoir.



Chapter 4

PARU—From Startup to Maturity

“In practice, I was the unofficial communications channel on security matters between the US government and the Royal Thai government, and Washington counted on my connection with General Phao to defend US equities in the program. Thus, it was left largely to Pranet and me to bridge the gap and make sure that we served the interests of both our masters.”



In 1954, Pranet Ritruetchai (on the left) became Bill Lair's partner in leading PARU to maturity. Pranet's combination of hell-for-leather leadership and assiduous attention to refining operational doctrine and technique boosted both the unit's morale and its competence. Lair and Pranet became fast friends over the years of their collaboration. Undated photo courtesy Bill Lair.



Above: PARU cadre, in undated photo, with Vint Lawrence, standing in center rear. Image from Vint Lawrence scrapbook, "The Mountain People of Northern Laos and Thailand 1962-1966 (Volume-2)" (1964). Scrapbooks. 2. <https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/lawrence-scrapbooks/2>.

For all its gratifying outcome, the session with General Phao created two problems. First was the surprise invitation to join the Thai National Police, an invitation that applied equally to Jeff Cheek. I wondered if such status were even legal, and, if so, whether CIA might see a security risk in our joining a foreign security service. The chief of station said he had no personal objection and thought it would serve our operational objectives very well. The decision would have to be made in Washington, however, so he relayed the question to Headquarters.

I expected some agonizing there, but after a surprisingly short time the answer came back: we could accept appointment as commissioned officers in the police, but all emoluments from that service would naturally revert to the US Treasury. The Thai moved even faster, and Jeff and I forthwith became captains in the National Police. Years later, on one of my rare trips to Washington, someone showed me a letter from Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to his brother Allen, then director of central intelligence. It noted the Agency's desire to allow two of its officers to join the Thai police force and agreed that this would serve the national interest.

The second difficulty created by Phao's decision stemmed from a basic difference in Thai and American cultures. Despite the accelerated modernization begun by King Chulalongkorn, Thai society remained traditional and hierarchical, and there was little vertical mobility for those at the lower end of the scale. This collided with my belief, acquired in combat in Europe, that leadership potential has nothing to do with social position and everything to do with motivation and native ability. The high casualty rate among company-grade officers in the 3rd Armored frequently left an NCO in charge of a platoon in combat, and I had often seen sergeants perform with distinction as officers.

My experience with the police privates chosen to be instructors at Lop Buri served only to strengthen that conviction. General Phao's sponsorship—and, perhaps, the luck of the draw—had given us first-class people, and I wanted the officers of the new unit to be drawn from among them. This turned out to be the only point on which General Phao had declined to commit himself during our meeting. Indeed, he made no comment at all when I suggested it.

At the time, I felt somewhat relieved. I suspect that, had he made the decision then and there, even a character as idiosyncratic as he might have deemed it too great a threat to established procedure. As it was, he treated the question in his characteristically pragmatic style and risked antagonizing his bureaucracy when he later exempted our officer candidates from the usual qualifying examination. We inaugurated the unit with his promise that, beginning in 1954, we could send three students a year to the police Reserve Cadet School. This became standard procedure, and, over the next 15 years, we drew all but half a dozen of our officers from our own ranks, producing incalculable benefits for unit effectiveness and *esprit de corps*.

By the time Phao and SEA Supply agreed on the creation of a police parachute unit, Saneh and I had devoted a good many evening discussions to its location, and I was ready when Phao asked me where I wanted to put our camp.

My request for the police barracks at Hua Hin rested on several considerations, not all of which I could confide to General Phao. First was the location itself. Hua Hin is situated 250 kilometers south of Bangkok, about midway along the country's north-south axis, between the Malaysian border on the south and Burma and Laos on the north. Served by the national railroad, it also had an airfield and was connected to Bangkok by a two-lane laterite highway that was about as good as any road in Thailand at the time. Centrally located and having access to a variety of transportation facilities, we would be able to deploy to trouble spots anywhere on the country's borders.

The diversified topography around Hua Hin constituted another desirable feature for a paramilitary training camp. The village lay on a beautiful curve of white sand on the east coast of the Kra Isthmus. A rugged limestone cliff loomed over the beach on the south and separated the village from the sea. About a mile west of the beach, a line of hills marked the beginning of an almost uninhabited stretch of jungle that covered the chain of mountains dividing the Kra Isthmus between Thailand and Burma. The location thus offered both a drop zone—the beach—and sites for both underwater demolition and jungle warfare training.

I shared these two considerations with Phao but kept the third to myself. This last consideration had to do with the uncertain tenure of any senior Thai official other than the king. The highly personalized style of Thai governance meant perpetual jockeying for position, with losers relegated—sometimes permanently—to some meaningless sinecure, private life, or, occasionally, jail. An organization could easily disappear along with its patron, and the more powerful the sponsor, the greater the likelihood of some kind of retribution if he left the scene.

That precariousness was what worried me about General Phao's enthusiasm for the proposed Airborne Royal Guard. On the one hand, as director general of the National Police, he controlled the second-most important power base in Thailand. The army outgunned him, to be sure, but the police, deployed throughout the country, had much greater potential for political influence at the local level. From this perspective, his sponsorship was ideal.

On the flip side, Phao had a potentially problematic relationship with Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, the commander of all Thai military forces—a relationship of professional competition compounded by a degree of mutual dislike. I had no way of knowing how their dealings would play out, but it was clear that the army's superior firepower did not prevent Sarit from seeing Phao as a serious rival for power. If our unit was to become a permanent institution in the Thai security structure, it would need insurance against any reversal in Phao's fortunes.

Nothing could guarantee us immunity from the results of political maneuvering. Nevertheless, I had an idea for a potential insurance policy: winning the protection of the throne. Young King Bhumibol was a constitutional monarch of strictly limited powers, but his popularity and influence were growing, and his good will toward us could mean a lot. I knew that Hua Hin was the site of a royal summer residence often visited by King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit. Indeed, their affection for Hua Hin had help transform it from a sleepy fishing

village into the vacation refuge of the Thai upper crust. A small police camp across the road from the royal compound housed the Royal Guard detachment that always accompanied them on their visits.

I assumed that the camp's transfer to PARU would come to the king's attention, if only because we would provide security when the royal family visited Hua Hin. With luck, proximity would spark some royal curiosity about our mission. If we could attract the king's sympathetic interest, we would be better placed to defeat any army power play. My little ploy eventually succeeded—in fact, far beyond my hopes—but I will save that story for later.



It was important, especially at the beginning, not to make too many demands on either Thai or US resources, so we made do with what we had when we could and scrounged when we couldn't. The National Police funded the rehabilitation and very modest expansion of administrative buildings, and SEA Supply took care of the parachute packing shed and drying tower, as well as the 34-foot tower to be used in jump training. A C-47 had crashed at the Hua Hin Airport some years earlier and had been rusting on the tarmac ever since. We cut apart the remaining sections and hauled the fuselage to the camp for use in parachute training.

With construction work well underway, it seemed a good time for me to take my first home leave, but there were two items that I had to take care of before I could go. The first was more ceremonial than anything else, but it had originated with General Sarit and therefore required our full attention. Royal Thai army Day was approaching, and Sarit wanted a spectacular display for the Thai and foreign elite in Bangkok. As a member of that elite, he knew that it tended to congregate at two watering holes, the Sports Club and the Turf Club. He chose the latter, which featured a race track surrounded by a short 18-hole golf course, for a parachute jump by army graduates of our training at Lop Buri.

In retrospect, the idea seems almost frivolous: we were supposed to drop 50 men on a tiny drop zone in the middle of a metropolitan area close to the Royal Palace and surrounded by power lines and crowded streets. It seemed to us that Sarit was inviting serious trouble, but we were in no position to refuse. With Jeff and me as jumpmasters, we loaded up on the appointed day and roared over Bangkok at jump altitude.

I was terrified when I saw the flags at the race track blowing straight out from their staffs in a dangerously strong wind. Prudence said we should cancel the jump, but Phao would have been humiliated, and the Airborne Royal Guard would probably have died a sudden death even before being properly born. So, after an extra pass over the DZ in the hope the wind would die down, we went ahead. Defying the odds, everyone landed on the race track or the golf course, and Sarit was delighted.

Sarit invited the American instructors to the Turf Club party that followed. He proved a most amiable host, joking about the horrible fate he had prepared for us had anything gone wrong. Nevertheless, he generously acknowledged my role in organizing the demonstration and my work at Lop Buri—"even if you are a policeman."

The general also engaged in some serious conversation about the Lop Buri program, and I tried to plant the idea that the army—not just the police—should find a permanent organizational home for the skills imparted at our Lop Buri camp. I had to make the argument in Thai fashion, indirectly and without explicitly urging him to do it. Sarit heard me out with apparent interest, but we parted with no indication as to what, if anything, he might do. Soon after, however, he designated the troops who made the display jump at the Turf Club as the nucleus of the Thai army's first airborne battalion and gave them our former camp at Lop Buri.

A parachute battalion was one thing, but a special warfare unit of the kind I had in mind quite another. As it happened, my notion got a decisive boost when Sarit sent the battalion's deputy commander to Fort Benning, Georgia, for advanced training. There, the Thai captain met the commander of the newly created US Special Forces, a man whose passionate commitment to the concept of partisan warfare against communist regimes found a receptive audience. When the young Thai officer got home, he solicited a meeting with Sarit at which he expounded the new doctrine he had absorbed from his mentors at Fort Benning. Sarit bought the idea in much the same way that General Phao had accepted my proposal for a special police unit. The battalion thereupon became the Thai counterpart of the US Special Forces. All of this was yet to be when I met Sarit after the demonstration jump, however.

With the Turf Club exercise out of the way, only one task remained before I departed on home leave—only one, but the most crucially important of my career with the Thai police. As I've described, General Phao had authorized us to form a 100-man company. The Lop Buri instructor cadre of 50 would all stay, so we needed just 50 more men. Phao had also agreed to let us recruit volunteers from among police graduates of the Lop Buri training program. The burden now fell on us to choose the right men.

We set up a selection committee that comprised Saneh, several senior instructors, Jeff, Jack, and myself. Together, we conducted a painstaking evaluation of every police trainee who had completed the program. Having followed every man through the course, we needed their training records only as an occasional reminder. We looked at personality, intelligence, stamina, and skills—including languages and area knowledge—but above all at motivation. Only those who had shown the commitment and courage needed to accomplish a new and risky mission would do. We selected about 70, anticipating that some might be unavailable. Saneh then got busy recruiting the men we had selected—we wanted only volunteers, of course—and I left for home.



After two years in the tropics, I found Texas oddly foreign when I landed at Houston Airport. My reunion with my mother and sisters, now living in Houston, banished that sensation. I visited Grandmother and Grandfather Lair, who had moved to Headly, in the Texas panhandle. Although visibly aging, they were as independent as ever, and I felt the surge of the admiration and gratitude they always inspired in me. They were intensely interested in my experience in Thailand, but, discreet as ever, asked no questions that I did not encourage with my somewhat edited accounts.

Mother and I then went to Montana to see Grandmother Tompkins and her youngest son, the Uncle Bill who was two years younger than I. He had been too young to serve in World War II and had taken grandmother to live in Montana when he found work there with the Northern Pacific Railroad. As they welcomed me, I found that the Montana scenery evoked almost as much nostalgia as the sight of their much-loved faces. I had lived there with them in a town called Paradise during summer vacations from A&M. I had usually worked for a logging company but had spent one summer with the Forest Service manning a lookout atop an isolated mountain.

One place I did not visit was Miami, the home of SEA Supply. This seems strange in retrospect, for it would be unthinkable now not to show one's face, renew acquaintances with colleagues and superiors, tout one's accomplishments, and lobby for a desirable next assignment. Things were indeed different in an organization run by people whose standards of discipline and patriotism had been shaped by their experience of total war. Management expected the troops to do as they were told when they were told. It never occurred to us that this was not necessarily the natural and permanent order of things. On the other hand, we had the freedom to figure out our own way of getting done what our bosses wanted.

In any case, having avoided a trip to the East Coast, I returned to Thailand in time to participate in the opening of the new camp at Hua Hin. General Phao came down to preside over the ceremony, which took place on April 27, 1953. We officially adopted our new unit insignia, a blue shoulder patch bearing the initials of King Bhumibol.

Phao exercised his prerogative to name our new headquarters. It became Camp Narasuan in honor of an ancient King of Thailand revered for his heroism in liberating the country from Burmese occupation. I was already familiar with the legend: King Narasuan, leading a Thai force against the Burmese, rode out so far ahead of his own troops that he was entirely alone when he encountered the Burmese army.

Faced with certain death or capture, Narasuan shouted a challenge to the Burmese king, "Fight me in single combat or prove yourself a coward!" The Burmese king was not a coward, and the two monarchs, riding armored war elephants, charged at each other. The duel ended with the death of the Burmese king just as Narasuan's forces arrived. They made quick work of the leaderless Burmese, and the survivors fled back to Burma. In the 1950s, the Burmese posed no threat, but the Narasuan legend, celebrating the exploits of one man rather than those of an army, seemed to provide just the right ethos for a tiny force trying to do a lot with a little.

General Phao then cemented our attachment to the legend. After the ceremony, he hosted a reception and dinner at the Railway Hotel, the favored vacation lodge of Bangkok officials and other luminaries. As it happened, one wall of the dining room featured a painting of the epic duel between Narasuan and the Burmese king. Chatting with Phao, I admired it and mentioned how suitable I thought his choice of a name for our camp. The next day, Phao bought the picture from the hotel and presented it to Saneh before returning to Bangkok. It still hangs in the PARU headquarters building.

With the formalities out of the way, it was time to organize and train our unit. General Phao had named it the 3rd Battalion of the Armored Royal Guard, but no one ever used that

somewhat misleading title. To Americans, it became known as the Royal Guard, to the Thai simply the Parachute Police.

As far as SEA Supply staff were concerned, I still had Jeff, but Jack Shirley was temporarily unavailable. The Hua Hin project was not the only Thai internal security program receiving US assistance through the SEA Supply mechanism. While I was in the States, Jack had been reassigned to work with the Royal Thai Navy at Sattahip, directly south of Bangkok on the eastern shore of the Gulf. The Navy wanted to start an underwater demolitions unit—frogmen, as they were often called—and Jack had been a professional diver in civilian life. CIA had taught him underwater demolition skills before he left it for SEA Supply, and he was now imparting these skills to the Thai. The unit is today an established part of the Royal Thai Navy.

Other SEA Supply activities also became permanent institutions of the Royal Thai government. They included the Border Patrol Police, the Water Police, the National Intelligence Agency (patterned after CIA), and the Royal Thai army Special Forces. SEA Supply also helped shape the Police Special Branch, the intelligence arm of the National Police. These units helped defeat the Thai communist insurgency of the 1970s. The association of SEA Supply with CIA in the public mind in Thailand only reinforced the legacy of OSS support to the Free Thai. The result—even when much publicity about CIA is critical, if not positively scurrilous—is that most politically aware Thai see the Agency in a constructive, even admiring, light.

In 1953, of course, the success and longevity of all these projects were still in question. My own concerns were strictly short term: to create an effective organization and immediately demonstrate that effectiveness in a pilot operation.

I began by creating two line platoons and a Pathfinder Platoon. The ethos common to parachutists would prevail in our Royal Guard unit, and I thought it essential to get our own facilities established. Accordingly, I assigned the Pathfinders to equip the new parachute packing room and the drying tower in which chutes would hang before being packed for use. The nucleus of this detachment was six packers trained by Lou Rucker at Lop Buri. Like the other platoons, the Pathfinders as yet had no commissioned officers, so Saneh and I looked among our Lop Buri cadre for a man to lead the platoon on potentially dangerous jumps into unknown terrain—canopied jungle, rock-strewn mountain valleys, or even over water.

After minimal discussion, we settled on Tawin Plengvanit, one of the five graduates of the first Lop Buri class selected as assistant instructors for subsequent training cycles. In terms of courage and charisma, he and our sole Muslim trooper, Dachar, were perhaps the two most outstanding leaders our unit ever produced. Both later died in action, as did two more of this group, Piyom and Somboon. Of the five, only Chert Chamrat would survive to retirement age and that only after a wild engagement with the North Vietnamese army in Laos in 1961, an episode about which more later.

I think Chert, who knew and loved them as much as I did, will accept this estimate of Tawin and Dachar. Like me, he recognized them as very different personalities who exhibited courage and leadership in entirely different ways. Dachar was as straight-laced as the most fervent Muslim, although he once told me that he continued to profess Islam only to avoid

distressing his mother. A scrupulously honest, teetotaling nonsmoker, he became one of the mainstays of the PARU deployment in Laos.

Tawin, unfortunately, did not stay with us long enough to display his professional strengths in the Laotian war. Much more flamboyant than Dachar, he enjoyed an evening on the town, and, if that occasionally involved a minor barroom brawl, it was all in a night's entertainment. His combination of flamboyance and almost reckless courage made him extraordinarily popular with his men regardless of what he demanded of them.

Tawin reciprocated that loyalty to the extent of risking his life. Not long after opening Camp Narasuan, we were conducting a practice jump with the Hua Hin beach as a drop zone. In a freak weather phenomenon, the light on-shore breeze changed to a stiff off-shore wind just after a "stick" of ten men had exited the aircraft. Tawin, jumpmaster on the mission, had remained aboard. Seeing his men being blown out to sea, he ordered the pilot to make a pass over them. He splashed into the water barely a minute after they did and, clad in water-soaked fatigues and jump boots, swam to each man to ensure that he had cleared his parachute and excess gear and could tread water until a boat came to the rescue.

Under this kind of leadership, the Pathfinder Platoon soon became the premier air-sea rescue unit in Thailand. The government called on it in situations—an air crash in an inaccessible area or boat sinking at sea—that required immediate action by trained personnel able to jump anywhere and render emergency aid while a larger rescue effort was being mobilized.

Tawin's loyalty to the unit and to me personally was unconditional. For good or ill, he showed an unquestioning disposition to follow orders. At Narasuan, this trait worked both to our advantage and to his, for we would not issue instructions that violated the law or either country's national interest.

Unfortunately for his career with us, Tawin could be indiscriminate in his loyalty, and this soon landed him in trouble. Returning to Bangkok one day, he was boarding the CAT C-47 at Chiang Mai when the pilot noticed him loading an extraordinarily heavy piece of luggage. Suspicious, the pilot radioed ahead to advise airport security at Don Muang. The bag turned out to be stuffed with opium, and Tawin was promptly arrested.

Advised of the arrest via police radio, I dashed up to Bangkok. In tears over his own naiveté and irresponsibility, Tawin denied any conscious participation in opium trafficking. He had simply accommodated a request from the mayor of Chiang Mai to deliver the bag to an associate who was to meet the plane in Bangkok.

I asked one of my old contacts from Lop Buri who was now stationed in Chiang Mai to verify this story. He did some checking and soon confirmed Tawin's account. Nevertheless, it was clear that Tawin's days with us were over. The most I could do was to intervene with General Phao to keep him from being cashiered. This I did, pointing out to Phao the rarity of leadership qualities such as Tawin's. Furthermore, I assured him that Tawin would in no way have profited from the transaction in which he had carelessly allowed the mayor to involve him.

Phao was furious at what he considered a stupidly unprofessional act, but he had seen Tawin in action and knew I spoke the truth about his extraordinary ability. Still very unhappy, the general settled for transferring Tawin to the Provincial Police.

Most of Tawin's fellow troopers were relieved to hear that Phao had not lowered the boom. Only the somewhat puritanical Dachar took it badly; in his eyes, a transgression like Tawin's required severe punishment. It took several intense discussions before Dachar finally accepted that individuals as able as Tawin could not be thrown away over a moment of weakness. Like me, Dachar saw Thailand teetering on the edge of hostilities with communist China, and he finally agreed that the country could not dispense with Tawin's continued service.

Disappointed at losing Tawin, I was nevertheless gratified to watch him justify my confidence in him. He went on to become perhaps the most outstanding officer in the Provincial Police and, 15 years later, the hero of the struggle against the Thai communist insurgency. As chief of police in a series of the most infested districts, he hunted down and arrested insurgent leaders or killed them if they resisted or attempted escape. His son, by the way, became one of the most popular stars of Thailand's movie industry, portraying action heroes very much like his father.

By the time of the Tawin incident, I had pretty well lost my innocence about narcotics. Before arriving in Thailand, I had known almost nothing of addictive drugs. I remember as a child hearing my mother and grandparents bitterly criticize the doctor who misdiagnosed the illness of my 19-year old aunt. She died of typhoid fever after he operated on her for appendicitis, and my family blamed what they said was his drug addiction. Otherwise, the subject had never come up; the only drugs used by the troops in Europe during World War II were nicotine and alcohol.

My education began in my early months with the Airborne Royal Guard. Saneh and I had the entire company out in the jungle west of Hua Hin and were sitting around the fire drinking coffee after finishing our evening meal. I heard some wild laughter from one of the other campfires but thought nothing of it until I saw that it had upset Saneh. He abruptly rose and, without a word, stalked over to the merrymakers. I could hear his furious recriminations but couldn't figure out the nature of the offense.

Leaving dead silence around that campfire, Saneh returned. I asked what was going on. He explained that some of the men had been smoking "gancha." He didn't know the English word, so I looked it up in my Thai-English dictionary. "Marijuana," it said. I had never heard of it.

I discovered a little later that marijuana was a forbidden substance in the United States, so I did a little research. It was not illegal in Thailand at that time and grew wild everywhere. People in remote rural areas often raised it, and one could see bundles hanging under houses raised on traditional stilts. During the long rainy season, when it was so often too wet to work, the men would sometimes sit around and smoke marijuana. Their wives even used it as a condiment. Only with the growth of drug consumption in the United States and the smuggling that fed it did marijuana get any attention from Thai legislators and police.



I never saw a repetition of the “gancha” incident, but, in any case, I had more immediate problems. As with Tawin and the Pathfinder Platoon, the leadership of the rest of the Airborne Royal Guard company reflected the near-total absence of commissioned officers. Newly promoted Major Saneh, our commander, was the only Thai line officer in the unit; the only other commissioned Thai officers were the doctor and a finance officer. I had been promoted to major, a welcome indication that the Thai thought I was making a contribution.

As far as protocol was concerned, Jeff, Jack, and I continued in an advisory capacity. In practice, however, it was tacitly understood that, in return for material support from SEA Supply, we had a major voice in establishing the unit’s structure and operating policy. This did not involve any kind of quid-pro-quo negotiations. For the Thai, it sufficed that the other Americans and I took care to look out for the welfare of the troopers. Although none of us ever “went native”—we never, for one thing, tried to conceal that we represented American as well as Thai interests—our men certainly saw us as bona fide members of the unit.

An opportunity for this kind of leadership arose when I discovered that the police finance officer assigned to us was engaging in petty loan-sharking with our troopers as his victims. When someone needed money between paydays to cover a family emergency, for example, he had nowhere to go. Enter our finance officer, who made loans at an annual rate of 240 percent. Putting an end to this practice would leave our men with no other recourse, so I took \$1,000 out of my own account, converted it into baht, and set up an emergency loan fund at no interest.

One never knows what will strike a chord. I am still surprised when, more than 40 years later, former Thai colleagues from these early days allude to the creation of that little fund and what it did to cement unit morale and cohesion. Even then, however, I was certainly aware that merely professing concern for one’s troops does not win their respect. I had already determined that identifying their interests with mine would constitute the core of my leadership style. I took it as a high compliment when, after many years with the unit, my friend Pranet Ritruetchai jokingly said he hoped we’d never have to compete for the loyalty of the men. “I’m not sure,” he said, “who would win.”

To fill the other officer positions, we chose from among the police corporals and sergeants who had served as instructors at Lop Buri. I recommended people I thought would practice a leadership style compatible with my own and was delighted to see Dachar Adulrat become company sergeant major and training officer. Other Lop Buri instructors became squad leaders. Many of these distinguished themselves later during the war in Laos. Makorn, for example, became our best planning officer, and, during the ceasefire in Laos, he developed a friendship with Hmong leader Vang Pao that helped preserve the resistance during a period of sharply reduced support.



Our freedom to create our own operational doctrine and training regimen meant that we could explore various forms of combat organization and test the physical capacities of our men. With respect to organization, I thought the US Marine rifle squad of 13 men, with its leader and three fire teams, offered a useful model. We would be operating in small teams

against presumably smaller enemy units than the Marines faced in conventional combat, however, so I modified the formula. At Camp Narasuan, we created seven-man squads with two three-man fire teams. Today, this remains the unit's basic operational element.

The 50 new men from the provinces needed refresher training, which Dachar promptly set out to give them. Saneh and I had already decided that the next imperative was a successful operation, and we began searching for a suitable target. We wanted something that would test our men's skills and courage and at the same time demonstrate our utility to both our Thai and our American superiors.

Saneh came up with the idea of an operation against opium smugglers in Chiang Mai Province in Northern Thailand. These were mostly Chinese, many of them remnants of the Kuomintang army that had taken refuge in neighboring Burma after 1949. They grew poppies and processed the drug, for the most part in Burma, before moving it through Thailand onto the world market in illegal narcotics. Saneh noted that the revenue from this traffic gave the smugglers the means to bribe local Thai officials into tolerating—or even protecting—their commerce.

I knew, of course, that opium consumption was still legal in Thailand. Only the government could buy the drug, however, and opium parlors were government-owned. The purpose of this monopoly was to limit the practice to already established addicts, and the illegal product that stayed in Thailand interfered with Bangkok's efforts to reduce local consumption. My own experience suggested that addiction was neither epidemic nor easily acquired. In all my years in Thailand I never knew an opium addict. I knew people, including SEA Supply colleagues, who tried smoking it once or twice but who got violently nauseated, not high.

Saneh acknowledged that he had an ulterior motive for suggesting an operation in Chiang Mai. According to regulations, police received a reward for confiscating illegal opium, and a certain proportion of that reward—perhaps 10 percent—was distributed according to the rank of the policemen involved. Saneh was engaged to be married but on his police salary had been unable to save enough money for wedding expenses. His share of a substantial reward would let him and his fiancée set a date for their wedding.

Saneh's idea took a certain amount of daring, as it was often rumored that powerful officials, including Generals Sarit and Phao, had an interest in the illicit trade. Phao readily agreed, however, confirming Saneh's confidence in his integrity. The CIA station also assented. The agreement did not stem from any active interest in the subject, for the use of heroin, an opium derivative, had not yet become a national crisis in the United States. Accordingly, in late October 1953, Saneh and I took two platoons and headed for Chiang Mai by train. National Police facilities there had no room for such a contingent, and we therefore resorted to an age-old practice of Thai travelers and sought refuge in a Buddhist temple.

The saffron-robed abbot of Wat Suandok, a famous temple at the edge of town, greeted us warmly. All he could offer was a bare floor, he said, but we were welcome to that. We spread our bedrolls on the tile. The renowned Reclining Buddha of Suandok watched over us at night for about four weeks, while the local police commander built a modest barracks for the men and a small cottage on stilts, adjacent to the temple, for Saneh and me.

Saneh set to work, using local police files and informants to gather the intelligence needed to plan the operation. I was not yet proficient enough in Thai, so I focused on local expatriates, hoping to get useful background information. Perhaps the most interesting of these contacts were the two generations of the Young family. Harold Young and his wife had both been born in Burma of American missionary parents and had themselves served as missionaries until being forced out in a wave of Burmese hostility directed primarily at the mountain tribes with which they worked. They had a teen-aged son, Bill, who like his parents had been born and raised in a Lahu Village. He loved to wander the mountains around Chiang Mai and eagerly gave us the benefit of his intimate knowledge of the local tribes.

One particularly colorful character was an aged Englishman who had lived in Thailand for many years. Beginning as an employee of the old Bombay Burma Company, which conducted logging operations in Northern Thailand, he later joined the Thai Forest Service. When he retired, already well advanced in age, he returned briefly to England. He found it lonely and cold, so he returned to Thailand to live out his years.

I became friends with this old man and often joined him for a sundown whiskey and soda. His forestry career had given him a detailed familiarity with the routes used by Chinese privateers in the opium trade, and he showed me on the map how they moved their cargoes by mule caravan along the high mountain trails from Burma into Thailand.

Saneh and I compared the results of our respective inquiries and determined that the largest local smuggling operation involved some 400 Haw tribesmen based on Doi Pui, a mountain that looms 5,000 feet over Chiang Mai town. These Muslim Chinese, whose home straddled the border between Burma and Yunnan Province in China, carried weapons, including machine guns and mortars acquired during their earlier service with the defeated Nationalist Chinese army.

Unfortunately for our purposes, the local police had almost no knowledge of the smugglers' defensive arrangements. The police chief did know that local mountain people, Hmong and Lahu tribesmen, regularly visited the smugglers' camp to sell vegetables and poultry. Saneh and I thought they might be useful for intelligence purposes, but the police chief said that they spoke no Thai and that the government had scarcely any contact with them.

At this point, Bill Young came to the rescue. He knew a Hmong tribesman he thought might help and set off into the hills to find him. A day or so later, Bill showed up at our quarters in the pagoda, bringing his Hmong friend with him. In a black cotton suit stiff with smoke and grease and with his splayed feet and deeply weathered face, the man looked 70, although he was probably not yet 40. His name was the Hmong word for "egg." He did not look like a born intelligence agent, but, speaking through Bill, he said he would help.

Like most mountain people, Bill's friend was illiterate, so we improvised a basic program in observation, weapons identification, and sketching. The man turned out to have a good memory and some aptitude for sketching; for a tribesman, he also possessed an enterprising spirit, reflected in his readiness to accommodate Bill Young. After a few days of instruction, we sent him off toward Doi Pui with a pack of local condiments to sell to the smugglers.

Two days later, he was back. He had spent a night at the smugglers' camp, which at that moment held some 200 men, and made a rough sketch for us of their quarters and guard posts. He identified their weaponry and described their night security measures. These measures betrayed a dangerous complacency; on one side, where the terrain dropped off almost vertically, the smugglers posted no guards at all. It was not a sheer precipice, however, and vegetation offered cover for a surreptitious approach. We decided to attack by that route.

At nightfall on the appointed day, we were close to the foot of the mountain. After reaching the cliff in full darkness, we waited until 0230 hours, intending to reach the smugglers' campsite at around 0300, when sleep is deepest. Leaving all gear except our weapons at the base of the cliff, we started the half-hour climb to the plateau.

Mr. Egg was right. There were no guards on that side, and we surprised a sleeping camp. We charged, firing as we came, and the pandemonium—more heard than seen—testified to the smugglers' panic. Many escaped in the darkness, but we killed one, wounded three others, and captured 40-odd. We also confiscated two-and-a-half tons of raw opium and recovered machine guns and an 81mm mortar.

The results were just what our fledgling unit needed, a rather spectacular success achieved without casualties. Over the next four months, we mounted more such raids, netting an additional 33 tons of raw opium. Again, we used intelligence from casual informants like the Doi Pui tribesman. In one case, we got a tip that smugglers would be descending from their refuge to sell a cargo of opium. We set up an ambush on the road and took them and their contraband without casualties on either side.

As a result of these operations, the illegal drug traffic around Chiang Mai came—at least momentarily—almost to a halt. The newly formed Border Patrol Police had just set up a detachment in Chiang Mai, and in early February 1954 we cheerfully ceded to it the counter-narcotics account in the province.

In fact, it was high time to return to Hua Hin, for the legendary good looks of Chiang Mai's women had begun to complicate both Saneh's life and mine. During our lengthy stay, we had met most of the Chiang Mai gentry, and in due course we made the acquaintance of a local beauty named Nuan Sawat. When we met her, she had not yet gone on to become Miss Thailand and appear in an international beauty pageant, but neither Saneh nor I was blind, and we were both more than a little smitten.

Neither of us thought of himself as a serious suitor—Saneh, after all, was engaged, and I considered myself totally unprepared to start a family. Her company was delightful, however, and her family hospitable. This made it easy to follow the local courting custom under which a young man—in this case, two young men—could see a girl only at home, where the entire family can serve as chaperones.

Saneh must have been more tempted than he admitted. At one point, things got a little tense when General Phao and Sitthi—already my friend and later my brother-in-law—visited Chiang Mai. Sitthi, Sid to his American friends, teased me in Saneh's presence that the general had heard of my attention to Nuan. If I wished, he said, Phao would serve as my go-between

and ask her father for her hand. The look of distress on Saneh's face betrayed more feeling for Nuan than I had guessed. The atmosphere cleared when I told Sitthi that marriage was not then in the cards for me, even if Nuan was interested. I suspect she just enjoyed the attention. In any case, she later married the mayor of Chiang Mai, one of the wealthiest men in Northern Thailand.

Although very far from wealthy, I had to decide what to do with my share of the reward money from the opium seizures. Saneh used his to finance his wedding, but SEA Supply rules forbade any double compensation for me. My Thai salary was already reverting to the US Treasury through SEA Supply, but I found myself thinking that the reward might best be used to support our rather thread-bare operation at Hua Hin. In any case, I reasoned, Treasury might well balk at being offered proceeds from a drug raid conducted by a foreign police service.

It occurred to me that it might be worth experimenting with the ubiquitous pack mule of the northern mountains for our operations in the south, so I bought several of them with my prize money and shipped them back to Camp Narasuan. We used them for a while in training exercises, but we discovered that the animals found it excessively hard going in the dense lowland vegetation, and the camp sold them on the local market.



Our return to Hua Hin brought an end to Saneh's service with the Airborne Royal Guard. Like all of the original complement at Lop Buri, he had joined an embryonic program with an uncertain future. Like many of the others, he had been caught up in the heady atmosphere of our attempt to improvise a response to what we perceived as a mortal threat to Thai independence.

Saneh came to realize, however, that what he wanted was a career in standard police work. He was bright and ambitious, and he doubted—with good reason—that a special unit so far outside the mainstream represented the way to the top. His inclination was abetted by his fiancée's father, a police general who wanted his prospective son-in-law to pursue a conventional career in Bangkok. Saneh certainly had no reason to apologize for his desire to move on, but, as we were now close comrades-in-arms and friends, he found it difficult to broach the subject with me directly. Instead, he used Sid as an intermediary. I assured Saneh that my only regret involved the loss of his professional competence and his company.

Saneh did go to the top, but he never forgot me or his former colleagues. He was enormously helpful to the unit and to me personally when I returned to Thailand in 1970 as an acknowledged CIA officer.

When Saneh left in early 1954, General Phao replaced him with a protégé, Lt. Col. Asawan. The new commander seemed professionally capable and was most affable, but he did not immediately take charge in the way that Saneh had done. Perhaps it was his style to proceed slowly and assert himself only when confident he had mastered a problem. He was often in Bangkok, absorbed in police politics, and we had begun to have doubts about his interest in the new assignment.

Our doubts would never be resolved. Just weeks after being assigned to us, Asawan died when the CAT C-47 we were using for a night training jump crashed in the Gulf of Thailand. He had been slated to go to Bangkok that night and had remained with the plane after the second load, including me, jumped over the beach at Hua Hin. I had landed and was removing my harness when the C-47 made a low pass to drop the static lines that had opened our military chutes as we jumped. It headed out over the water toward Bangkok, and I watched until it was almost out of sight.

Suddenly its lights disappeared and I heard a faint thumping sound. I shouted that the plane was down, and our three-man frogman team, always on duty to rescue a jumper who might land in the water, leaped in and swam in the direction of the flight path. They were putting themselves at risk and had only a small chance of finding any floating wreckage so far away in the darkness, but we had no boat for a search party. I did the only thing I could think to do and ran to my jeep at the edge of the drop zone. I pointed its headlights out to sea to serve as a beacon for anyone—frogman or crash survivor—looking for land. About an hour later, with the frogmen still out in the dark water, a small fishing boat approached the shore, carrying the pilot. The fisherman had found him swimming toward shore but had seen no one else.

The pilot was in a state of shock but managed to tell us that he had sensed the aircraft falling and had hauled back on the yoke, at which point the plane hit the water. Only the tail section, broken off from the fuselage, was still afloat. The pilot had seen Colonel Asawan, apparently unhurt, clinging to it. Asawan had told him that he could hold on while the pilot swam for help.

Our camp doctor was tending to the pilot when the exhausted frogmen staggered onto the beach. They confirmed that the tail section was still afloat but said they had seen no one. Darkness prevented them from diving, so they had attached a small float to mark the spot and returned to the beach. We awakened some local fishermen, who spent the rest of the night looking in vain for more survivors.

At first light, a boat took Jack Shirley and his diving gear out to the wreck. The sunken fuselage still hung by a stringer or two to the floating tail section, and Jack dived down into it until he had recovered five bodies. Four of them were our men and the last the copilot—but no Colonel Asawan. Despite ugly burns from prolonged contact with the gasoline slick at the crash site, Jack dived again and again searching for him to no avail. It was not until several days later that the colonel's body washed up on the beach north of Hua Hin.

At the time of the accident, General Phao was in Switzerland, accompanied by Sid. We got word to them about the crash and the loss of Asawan. While they were still abroad, Sid called to say that Phao wanted my recommendation for a replacement. I was flattered to be asked, but the general's interest in my suggestion was more important to me because it proved that he had no intention of using the Airborne Royal Guard to advance his personal or political interests.

The opportunity to find long-term leadership for the Airborne Royal Guard made me reflect on the qualities I was looking for. The traditional virtues of competence, energy, and integrity were, of course, indispensable, but the new leader needed additional qualities to meet

the challenges of a mission still only vaguely defined. Such a commander should be innovative and pragmatic and disciplined without being rule-bound. He would have to prefer the job to any other and be ready to place the welfare of the unit and its men above his own career. He would also have to be able to deal with an American adviser whose continued support depended in part on the unit's contribution to US Cold War objectives in Southeast Asia.

A very tall order indeed. I fear that on paper it resembles the overblown rhetoric commonly used by organizations that like to think of themselves as elite. In fact, it was the way I saw the job—and I thought I knew the right man for it. As a lieutenant, Pranet Ritruetchai had been one of our very best students at Lop Buri, and I had gotten to know him well. We traded personal reminiscences over many an evening sipping Singha beer—Pranet unquestionably had a fondness for it—and he heard as much about combat in Europe as I did about life during the Japanese occupation.

When the Japanese invaded in 1942, Pranet was a cadet at the National Police Academy. A decade later, he had not shaken the humiliation of the government's decision to let the Japanese march in. It never occurred to me to doubt his passionate assertion that, had he known then what Lop Buri taught him, he would have taken to the jungle to fight the invaders.

Pranet demonstrated in training that he was no mere talker. He came much better prepared than most: he had graduated from British jungle warfare training in Malaya, where he learned, among other things, the fine art of parachuting into rain forest. He spared no effort in the theoretical segments and always took the lead in the most grueling training operations. He completed a five-mile hike with full equipment in record time, and his performance endeared him to the other trainees as much as to the staff. I gradually came to see in him a capacity for charismatic leadership untainted by excessive ego.

Pranet's easy empathy with the troops reflected his own modest background. His father was descended from an ethnic minority called *Soo*, native to the northeast, and had spent almost an entire career as an enlisted policeman before becoming an officer and retiring as a captain.

If his humble origins made Pranet accessible to his men, his small stature probably had something to do with his courage and competitiveness. Today, he would not meet the minimum height requirement for the academy. This perceived deficiency gave him something to prove and made him the kind of man the Thai call "prik kee nu"—that is, "rat-shit pepper"—a term of admiration drawn from the tiny green pepper that is perhaps the hottest in the world.

When I submitted his name in late 1953, Pranet had just become a captain. I anticipated trouble with Phao because, in assigning Lt. Col. Asawan, he had treated us as a battalion-level organization. Phao reacted just as I had expected: Pranet was too junior. Prepared for his comment, I noted that the unit medical officer, Dr. Nakorn Srivanit, was a major and suggested that protocol might be adequately served if he took over formal command and Pranet became his deputy. Nakorn would handle administration, and Pranet would take over operations and training.

I was counting on General Phao's well-known affinity for unconventional solutions, and he did not disappoint me. He had no intention of imposing the idea on Nakorn or Pranet if either was unwilling, however, and delegated me to get their respective reactions. Only then did I learn that Nakorn wanted to leave the medical service and become a line officer in the police. That ambition might well have killed any desire to accommodate me; after all, I was asking him to become a figurehead commander, something that would soon be apparent to anyone dealing with us. Nevertheless, he readily agreed to stay until Pranet was promoted to major. I like to think that his generosity was eventually rewarded; after he left us, he rose to flag rank as chief of the Forest Police. Meanwhile, he and Pranet established an entirely collegial relationship. Pranet deferred to Nakorn on administrative and protocol matters while taking vigorous charge of operations.

As I had anticipated, Pranet's combination of hell-for-leather leadership and assiduous attention to refining operational doctrine and technique boosted both the unit's morale and its competence. The troopers soon recognized the trait that I had first observed at Lop Buri, his willingness always to put the unit and its mission ahead of personal or career advantage. For them—as for me—he could have no more important quality.

Even when indulging his sometimes flamboyant style, Pranet had the unit's professional image in mind. I vividly recall one incident: a new minister of interior was to make a protocol visit to the Police Academy at Samparang, near Bangkok, but police communicators failed to deliver Pranet's invitation. By the time he saw the message, it was too late to drive up. By pure chance—we had no aircraft permanently assigned to us—a C-123 cargo plane was warming up on the airstrip, about to leave for Bangkok. We prevailed upon the pilot to—quite literally—drop Pranet off on the way.

It could not have worked any better had it been rehearsed. The cadets were in formation and the minister's motorcade had just arrived when the C-123 roared over at the prescribed 800 feet. Pranet floated to the ground, landing in front of the cadets as the minister approached to review them. Pranet saluted, the cadets cheered, and our stock went up. It wasn't just bravado: Pranet always recognized that substance and style are inseparable, that the identity of the Airborne Royal Guard depended not only on its unique skills but also on a calculated display of that uniqueness. The cadets who watched that display later filled the senior ranks of the National Police, and, when I see them, they still often mention it.

A performance like that at Samparang might make Pranet seem less thoughtful to the outside observer, but I had grown accustomed to his partnership in working out our operational mission and preparing the unit to carry it out. His adaptability and decisiveness were tested from the very day he joined us. As of late 1953, our respective superiors respected our unit's competence, and both saw it as an important resource for emergencies. Neither the police nor CIA management had ever issued any detailed mission order, however. This was perhaps just as well, for the guidance we did get differed substantially in its emphasis. The Thai focused on border security, while Washington saw us mainly as an instrument of potential intervention against communist destabilization of neighboring states.

In practice, I was the unofficial communications channel on security matters between the US government and the Royal Thai government, and Washington counted on my connection with General Phao to defend US equities in the program. Thus, it was left largely to Pranet and me to bridge the gap and make sure that we served the interests of both our masters.

We could do that only if the two of us had essentially identical views on the range of missions we could and should undertake. I agreed that border security was a legitimate and important function, and Pranet shared the US view of our potential for deployment outside Thailand. Given this consensus, it was easy for us to agree on matters ranging from personnel selection standards to the minutiae of training for jungle combat.



Chapter 5

Royal Favor and Entry into a Cosmopolitan Family

“When Pranet and I met him, King Bhumibol was not yet 30. His questions about the border areas revealed an intense concern for his subjects’ welfare, but they also suggested that he had not yet determined his own role in promoting it. The monarchy was now constitutional, not absolute, and King Bhumibol thus had no precedent to guide him.”



Troop formation by the beach at Camp Narasuan, the king's former summer palace in Hua Hin, Vint Lawrence Collection.



King Bhumipol aboard an Air America aircraft and Queen Sirikit taking aim with a submachine gun, presumably at Camp Narasuan. Undated photos from Lawrence Collection.

As part of the arrangement that gave us Camp Narasuan, we had taken over security duty for the royal family when its members came to Hua Hin. Not long after our arrival in the spring of 1953, King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit came to stay at the royal retreat. Protocol required that the camp commander pay a ceremonial call on His Majesty. Because Colonel Pranet was always generous in acknowledging my role in the creation and management of the Airborne Royal Guard, he insisted that I accompany him.

This provoked one of our rare disagreements. A meeting with the king would certainly be a rare privilege for a foreigner of modest rank, but I wanted to avoid anything that suggested a predominant American voice in the project. My membership in the unit in itself provoked some suspicion, especially in leftist circles, and I wanted to give them as little ammunition as possible.

Pranet was adamant, however, so I put on my dress uniform, and we crossed the main road to the royal guest house. King Bhumibol was as gracious as his reputation had led us to expect, and he seemed intrigued by the idea of a foreigner as an officer in his National Police. Nevertheless, our dealings with him would probably have remained pro forma had he not expressed curiosity about the unit, which, like all Thai, he referred to as the Police Parachute Unit (*Tamroat Potlom*).

The king knew that our protective duties at Hua Hin were a secondary mission, and he inquired about our work on Thailand's frontiers. Pranet described all three aspects—intelligence, border security, and efforts to extend government services and authority to the tribes. The king's astute comments and questions revealed a lively interest in Thailand's remote areas and tribal minorities. My earlier intuition about the advantages of a relationship with the Palace was confirmed at this meeting, which gave rise to the king's direct participation in our project.

When Pranet and I met him, King Bhumibol was not yet 30. His questions about the border areas revealed an intense concern for his subjects' welfare, but they also suggested that he had not yet determined his own role in promoting it. The monarchy was now constitutional, not absolute, and King Bhumibol thus had no precedent to guide him. Nevertheless, it was clear to Pranet and me that he would not be content to be a mere figurehead. From the time of that first ceremonial meeting, we operated on the premise that making ourselves useful to the king would encourage him to protect us from political interference and bureaucratic competition.

We could offer one thing in return—refuge for the royal family in the event of a communist-inspired uprising. Along with the rest of the Thai public—not just the security forces—we considered a coup to be a real danger, and Pranet and I laid out various contingency plans to

spirit the royal family to safety in the mountains at Huai Sat Yai and, if necessary, to refuge abroad.



The introductory session with the king exposed me to the fascinating complexities of royal protocol. I discovered that the monarch never directly addresses his subjects, even in face-to-face conversation, but simply makes a statement or asks a question. If more than one other person is present, there can be some guesswork involved in determining who should respond. With Pranet and me it was easy because, when the king wanted to address me, he signaled his desire by switching to English—not by looking directly at me.

Later, in more formal sessions with a court official present, I saw that the king's visitors would address a functionary who translated what they said into formal court language for the king. The royal reply would be similarly translated for the person he wanted to address. I had several private meetings with the king over the course of my career with no such intermediary, but even then he never addressed me by name.

Life at the royal court might be full of archaic ritual, but—fortunately for Pranet and me, not to mention the country as a whole—King Bhumibol himself was anything but tradition-bound. He had been born in 1925 in Boston, where Prince Mahidol, his father, had gone to study medicine. Mahidol was equally liberal in outlook. He had had to defy court protocol even to touch a commoner, which medical practice obviously required. In addition, he had married a commoner, a woman raised as the adopted daughter of a Thai princess who had become a nurse while they lived in the United States. When they returned to Thailand in 1928, royal protocol prevented his working at Bangkok's most modern hospital. Instead, he served at the only private hospital in Thailand, at Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand.

Mahidol's childless elder brother, King Prachadipok, was deposed in the 1932 coup d'état, and Bhumibol's elder brother, Ananda, also born in Boston, took the throne in 1946, after Thailand had been under a regency for 14 years. Within a year, Ananda was dead, whether accidentally or not was never fully clarified. Two pages of the royal court were eventually executed for the alleged murder; they may well have been victims of the anti-communist zeal that prevailed as much in Thailand as in the West. In any case, Ananda's death left Bhumibol as heir to the throne. Bhumibol postponed his coronation until 1950 so that he could finish his education in Switzerland. He might also have thought it imprudent to return while the circumstances of his brother's death were still in dispute.

Although it had become a constitutional monarchy in 1946, Thailand had by the mid-1950s acquired what was essentially a military government. Democratic forms did little to conceal the junta's authority, and corruption flourished. I had the impression that the people at large saw the generals as suspicious of the monarchy and fearful that the king might try to limit their power.

The people probably had it right. Nevertheless, the military saw the need for something around which to mobilize popular opposition to the communist threat. I think they were as impressed as I by the powerful emotion that greeted the royal couple on their return to

Bangkok in 1951. I witnessed that event. Visiting Bangkok from Lop Buri, I joined the vast throng that pressed the banks of the Chao Phraya to see the ship that bore the royal couple home. The crowd spread from the river back into the neighboring streets; it seemed that the entire population of Bangkok wanted to greet the king and queen. The electric atmosphere revealed an intense popular identification with the monarchy, especially on the part of the lower classes, that I never forgot.

The generals exploited the people's devotion to the monarchy by treating the king with a great outward display of loyalty. In actuality, they had no desire for a monarch with real political influence, and the new king's youth and inexperience doubtless encouraged them to think that he would always defer to them. Indeed, King Bhumibol scrupulously respected the constitutional limits of his power. Nevertheless, his genuine concern for his people, enhanced by his unassuming style and the beauty and grace of Queen Sirikit, gradually won him immense moral authority. That, of course, conferred political influence, something that he used on our behalf at key moments in the unit's early years.

The experience of the royal reception in Bangkok was still vivid in my mind when I asked General Phao to give us the police camp at Hua Hin. Although I even then hoped for royal endorsement of our unit and its mission, it never occurred to me to hope for the kind of personal attention that the king lavished on us.

Pranet and I also got to know the queen. I first met her at the annual Hua Hin reception celebrating the royal wedding anniversary. Although limited to local officials and notables, it was a large function, and all of the guests were eager for time with their hosts. Nevertheless, both she and the king took the trouble to engage Pranet and me in conversation. It was then, or soon thereafter, that the queen, less burdened by the protocol of power than her husband, took to addressing me as "Bill."

Shortly afterward, we began to see the king quite regularly. An avid marksman and student of small arms, he practiced target shooting with us at Camp Narasuan. Pranet had to be in attendance whenever the king visited the camp, and the two developed a close and enduring friendship. Years later, realizing that Pranet had approached retirement age without ever owning his own home, the king gave him one, on the beach south of Narasuan. He thus assured himself of Pranet's company, for he could sail his dinghy down the coast from the camp and drop in, unannounced, for a Singha and a chat. The king had long since abandoned the protocol that had so struck me at my first meeting with him.

Even in the early days, Pranet and I were often invited to informal social gatherings at the Hua Hin royal guest house. At such events, the rules of protocol pretty much dissolved. The king played both piano and saxophone and had a band drawn from among relatives and friends. Guests unable to play an instrument were required to sing solos to the accompaniment of the band. I had to do this once, and, although the queen bravely complimented me on my performance, I knew she was just being polite.

On one particularly festive night, the king picked up his saxophone and, like the Pied Piper, led his guests out across the beach and, fully clothed, into the sea. We floundered

around in the warm surf before returning to the residence, sodden but a little more clear-headed.

I got enormous satisfaction out of being included in such revelries. For one thing, they were fun. In addition, even if they contributed nothing directly to the achievement of my mission in Thailand, they signaled that I had been accepted by an essential part of the Thai establishment. Whatever its professional skills and accomplishments, the future of the Airborne Royal Guard depended on continued sponsorship from somewhere in the fractious power centers that constituted the Royal Thai Government.

Social distractions, however enjoyable, were strictly incidental to the king's interest in our Royal Guard unit. He was attracted mainly by our border security mission and what he saw as our potential to help turn reclusive tribesmen into willing Thai citizens. At this point, his majesty's role in Thai political life was highly circumscribed, and this gave him the leisure to explore how best to contribute to the national welfare. One of his earliest initiatives was an agricultural research station, still in operation today, which he built on the palace grounds in Bangkok.

From the beginning, the king displayed as much interest in social and political questions as in economic development. He seemed to like including me when he discussed these issues with Pranet—partly, I think, because my status as a foreigner allowed a more spontaneous exchange than he could easily achieve with his Thai subjects. He also knew that for several years I had been studying ways and means of connecting the government in Bangkok with its remote rural constituencies. I got the impression that he wanted to know how an informed Western observer saw the problems of these areas and what solutions such an observer might propose.

I was happy to oblige, because it seemed to me that the customary Thai way of exercising governmental power risked enabling communist revolutionaries to triumph. Over the course of several conversations with the king, I compared the traditional, hierarchical Thai system with the more participatory style of American governance. Where Americans thought of themselves as having created their own government, the average Thai saw simply a central authority, paternalistic at best, that reached as far out from Bangkok as its resources and energy allowed.

The king as a national symbol might be widely revered, but the administration of government was still seen, especially by minorities and the poor, as arbitrary and exploitative. I argued that Thailand's constitutional forms had not essentially altered that relationship with the governed. If the government wanted the active allegiance of its marginal constituencies, it had to earn it by providing protection and services and offering social mobility to those at the bottom of the social and political pyramid. Failing this, voting would remain an empty formality, something to be exchanged for small material favors from village chiefs or the central government.

The more we talked, the more clearly I realized that I was preaching to the choir. After all, the king had been educated in the West and was entirely at home with the precepts of representative democracy. Nevertheless, his youth and essentially figurehead role as head of state

meant that he would have to lead by example as he worked to propagate his convictions. He adopted the Border Information Centers (BICs) as one vehicle for this, using palace household funds to pay their elementary school teachers.

The king did not have to worry about stepping on his ministers' toes because General Phao's permissive management style meant that we at Camp Narasuan got no explicit guidance from him or the Ministry of Interior. CIA, similarly inclined to leave operations to Pranet and me, could but welcome the implied royal endorsement of the Parachute Police and its mission. Thus, when in 1956 we proposed forming a third company, our masters on both sides readily agreed.

The decision was easier for SEA Supply, whose investment of resources would increase only slightly. Our World War II combat gear still came from military surplus stocks at no cost. The Thai, on the other hand, had to come up with the money to pay and support 100 new recruits. The new company brought unit strength to that of a light battalion, and it appeared that we had become an accepted, even valued, part of the Royal Thai Government security establishment. Meanwhile, my acculturation to the land and its people proceeded apace.



It will already be clear to the reader that, if any one person set the direction of my career, it was General Phao, who had accepted my proposal to create an airborne police unit trained and equipped for security work in the jungle. If Phao made Thailand my career, however, it was Willis H. Bird, expatriate American businessman, and Sitthi who made Thailand my life.

It all started with Phao's use of Sid—the nickname Sitthi had assumed as a student in the United States—as his principal liaison with SEA Supply. Sid actually worked at the headquarters of the Royal Thai Air Force, but, in an ad hoc arrangement common in Thailand, he served as Phao's aide in dealings with foreign officials. Having spent years in the United States, Sid was very much at home with Americans. He made friends with the SEA Supply contingent, and he and his very charming wife, a pharmacist who had just graduated from Chulalongkorn University, were invited to almost all SEA Supply social activities.

Like many other young members of the postwar Thai elite, Sid had served in the Free Thai during World War II. Fairly early in our association, he told me the story, recounted in the first chapter of this book, of his World War II adventure as a member of an airborne resistance team captured after parachuting into occupied Thailand. When we first met, his superiors—including Phao—had already recognized his potential to become one of the senior civil servants who provide the professional expertise and apolitical independence that make a country work. He was a man of exceptional ability and energy, free of any taint of corruption, the sort who might well wind up as a Privy Councilor to the king. That is exactly what happened to Sid.

Even in the early days, when I struggled to master the tonal complexities of the Thai language, Sid was easy to talk to. At the time of Pearl Harbor, he had already received a B.S. degree from MIT, and, after the war, he returned to get a master's degree in metallurgy. All this followed an upbringing which included intensive drills in Oxford English. As a result, I never had to inflict on him the rough-and-ready Thai I was learning on the job.

A general's aide learns how to while away the time when his presence is required but not his services. On occasions like ceremonial visits to Lop Buri and later Hua Hin, when General Phao was closeted with other dignitaries or perhaps the king, Sid and I exchanged reminiscences, and I became familiar with the colorful Savetsila history.

To begin with, *savetsila* is the Thai word for alabaster. It became Sid's family name when King Chulalongkorn required his subjects—who had until then used only a given name—to adopt a surname. Sid's expatriate English grandfather complied by translating his family name, Alabaster, into Thai.

Thailand had become Henry Alabaster's adopted country when, after service with the British mission (I think it was then a legation) in Beijing, he arrived in Bangkok in the mid-19th century. Thailand was then in the throes of modernization, first under King Mongkut and then, after his death in 1868, under King Chulalongkorn. One of the royal children educated by the English governess made famous by *Anna and the King of Siam*, Chulalongkorn traveled widely before his accession to the throne and, once on the throne, sought out foreign talent to advance his father's reforms.

Just how Henry Alabaster came to the king's attention I do not know, but he served in Thailand during the period of French and British competition for colonial possessions in Southeast Asia. King Chulalongkorn saw that military resistance to those European powers was impossible and set out instead to play them off against each other. He operated on the assumption that no one was better attuned to British and French tactics than people with experience in their implementation. Accordingly, he hired French and British expatriate advisers such as Henry to help him preserve Thai independence through a combination of Western economic and social reforms and diplomatic maneuvering.

Henry Alabaster became an important member of the king's circle of advisers, supervising diverse projects like road construction, the design and construction of a national museum, and the installation of the country's first telephone and telegraph system. In due course, Henry acquired a Thai wife, and they had two sons before he died of cerebral malaria in 1884. Henry had accompanied some of the royal family on an outing in the countryside, where he probably contracted the disease. He was buried in the old British Cemetery on New Road in Bangkok, where the king built a monument to him, a model of a European cathedral large enough to walk in. A bust of Henry was inscribed with the famous line, "A scholar is not without honor save in his own country."

Henry's two sons by his Thai wife each spent some 10 years at school in England. Nevertheless, the household into which Sid was born was essentially Thai, albeit with English-style idiosyncrasies. Sid recalled growing up in somewhat straitened financial circumstances. His father—Henry's son—had lost his job as chief of the Forest Service when conspirators led by Pridi and Pibul overthrew King Chulalongkorn's erratic successor in 1932. Sid's father supplemented his modest pension with work for the Borneo Company and the Bombay Burma Company, both engaged in logging in Thailand. He was an expert in that field and the author of books on the trees of Thailand, and several species discovered in his time are named after him.

Despite the loss of his position, Sid's father maintained a Western wardrobe and was seen on the streets of Bangkok in an impeccably white linen suit and a Panama hat. Portraits of British and Thai monarchs hung side by side at home, and Sid recalled being forced to eat porridge every morning in a bow to English notions of proper nourishment.

Sid was only one of the 15 victims of this regimen, for his father had adopted the Thai practice—legal until 1940—of polygamy. Sid's father had five wives, and they and their 15 children lived in the same house in what Sid and others of his siblings later described to me as remarkable harmony. Sid joked in his later years that, whatever success he had as foreign minister, he owed to the observation of his father's diplomatic skills at home.

In a family with eight girls, all renowned for their good looks, Sid became something of a matchmaker. By the time I entered the picture, three of his sisters had married American-educated members of the Free Thai resistance with whom he had jumped into Thailand in 1943. One, Chalermsee, had married former OSS man Willis Bird; three others had found their mates outside Sid's circle of OSS veterans. Only the youngest, Chalern, remained unmarried.

I first saw Chalern one night at Chez Eve, when she came for dinner with Willis and Chalermsee. Seeing them proceed to their table, I knew instantly who she was. Like the other Savetsila sisters, she was unusually tall, and in her delicate beauty she greatly resembled Chalermsee. I went over, and Willis introduced me. Chalern never met my eyes on that occasion, and I myself was far too shy to press any conversation.

Whatever Chalern and I might have thought, the die was cast. Chalern and Chalermsee, who had been born in the same month thanks to the polygamous Savetsila household, were as close as twins. Chalermsee was determined to ensure that her sister, younger by a matter of weeks, should have a husband.

As it happened, nearly everyone in the family liked Hua Hin as a vacation retreat, and Chalern often came with Chalermsee and Willis or with Sid and his wife, Theeda. On such occasions, I would be invited to picnics on the beach or inland at a waterfall that attracted many tourists.

It soon became clear that the entire family thought us a good match, and Chalern's sisters conspired to bring us together both at Hua Hin and in Bangkok. Chalern was certainly lovely, but I was so absorbed in my work that it hardly seemed the right time to start a family. More important, perhaps, was the fact that she seemed not much less reluctant than I. The absence of any hint of interest discouraged me from thinking of myself as a bona fide suitor. As the months passed, however, I found myself looking for opportunities to see her, and she accepted my company—although never without a chaperone.

That we were never alone together reflected not just social custom but also—I suspected—Chalern's preference. It seemed to me that she cherished her privacy, and, as my attraction to her grew, I realized that if I married her I would be taking as a partner a girl I hardly knew. Nevertheless, she did not hide the firmness of her moral convictions or her conservative views on social matters, and I liked these qualities. Just what Chalern saw in me, I'm not sure, but at least I was tall enough. She later confided that one reason for her indifference to Thai suitors

was that they were all too short. I did not realize, in our courting days, how sensitive she was about her height, which to me was always one of her charms.

Anyway, on a visit to Bangkok, I finally asked Chalern if she would marry me. She replied in a perfectly noncommittal tone, “I will have to ask my father.” This seemed to me to imply that she intended to ask, and that is what happened. The next thing I knew, the matchmaking magic of the Savetsila family had taken effect, and the two hesitant principals were engaged.

We were married on December 31, 1954. Although it turned into the grandest wedding I’d ever seen, the ceremony began in traditionally modest Buddhist fashion at the Savetsila home. At six-thirty that morning, Chalern and I stood outside the house, offering cooked food to the Buddhist priests who began their day walking down the streets with their begging bowls.

At around 11 a.m., four or five priests returned, and we gave them lunch, which, as their last food of the day, they had to eat by noon. They then started chanting the customary prayers, after which the guests were served lunch and the government’s district officer—also a guest—brought the official document on which Chalern and I signed our wedding vows.

For legal purposes, we were now man and wife, but the ritual was only beginning. In the afternoon, we changed from street clothes into Western-style wedding attire, with Chalern in a long white dress and best man Jack Shirley and me in the white dress uniform of the Thai National Police. At about 5:30 p.m., we proceeded to Magnasila Palace, the headquarters of the government political party, where General Phao was sponsoring a traditional Thai wedding.

In the center of the great hall of the Palace we found a padded platform, elevated slightly on carved legs and just large enough for the two of us to sit with our legs folded under us, feet to the right. Custom required that we lean forward on our elbows, reaching out with cupped hands. The guests—at least 500 of them—then passed before us, each pouring a little ceremonial water on our hands. No one officiated, for we were in a sense being married by each of our guests in a ceremony that derived from ancient village life. The unnatural posture we had to maintain became torture, and, by the time the ceremony was over, neither bride nor groom could stand up. It took the help of Jack Shirley and Chalermsee Willis, Chalern’s matron of honor, to bring us to our feet.

The reception drew newly appointed US Ambassador John E. Peurifoy and Prime Minister Pibul, along with many other government officials and military officers. Of course, all of SEA Supply was there. General Phao, as our sponsor, gave the main speech, after which the heads of each of the two families addressed the guests. Having no family in Thailand, I had to make my own speech.

With speeches, a luxurious buffet, and music, the festivities lasted until almost midnight. Our honeymoon in Hong Kong, which began the next day, included among its pleasures a respite from all the crowds. Back in Bangkok, however, we had to deal with wedding gifts. There might have been more gifts than guests, because it was literally years before we finally opened the last of them. We stored a lot of them at Chalern’s parents’ home in Bangkok and then rented a house on the beach in Hua Hin and set up our first household there.



I reflected on it very little at the time, but I realize now that my union with Chalern, whatever its unique aspects, was very much in the mainstream of Thai culture. Confident of their own national identity, the Thai had done better than any other people in Asia in absorbing foreign people and practices.

Only with respect to the Chinese was there an element of coercion in this assimilation. The Thai, ever wary of their colossal northern neighbor, wanted no distinctively Chinese minority. Accordingly, they had long prohibited the Chinese in Thailand from operating their own schools. Given the absence of significant differences in physical features or religious belief, this produced a Sino-Thai population that, within three generations of an immigrant family's arrival, knew no Chinese—not even the spoken, let alone the written, language. Most such families considered themselves fully Thai.

When I first went to Thailand, this cultural openness still applied to Europeans, but the loyalty of the Chinese minority, at least that of relatively recent immigrants, had come to be regarded with some suspicion. Mao Zedong had just conquered China, and Chinese troops had joined the battle against General MacArthur's forces in Korea. The Thai felt directly threatened by what they—and the United States—saw as a huge nation that was now an instrument of predatory international communism. In this atmosphere, Chinese ancestry was not readily acknowledged.

I knew that Chalern's maternal grandfather had been Chinese, but, in the early days, she would not admit it, and I would tease her about being descended from a Chinese bandit. As the Chinese communist threat receded, it gradually became fashionable for members of the upper class to acknowledge Chinese ancestry. A few years ago, the then prime minister of Thailand paid a visit to his ancestral village while on a state visit to China. By that time, it had long since become routine for commanders at Hua Hin to accept Sino-Thai applicants into our unit.

The result for me of this easygoing acceptance of foreigners was a remarkably painless assimilation into a Thai family and, more generally, into Thai society. I avoided the mistake of trying to "go native," that is, to submerge my own culture in an effort to absorb another. I never tried to make the Thai think of me as one of them. At the same time, my years at Lop Buri living and socializing almost exclusively with Thai people had acculturated me to a point at which our differences faded into insignificance.

This is not to say that an international marriage like Chalern's and mine didn't have its idiosyncrasies. From the beginning, Chalern and I each used our native language to address the other even though she spoke good English and I was reasonably fluent in Thai. Thus, I would address her in English, and she would respond in Thai.

A little later, I began addressing her sometimes as "chief," for her shyness did not prevent her, as a homemaker, from running a tight ship. Like all middle-class Thai wives, Chalern had domestic help, usually peasant women from the countryside. She had an unspoken contract with these women and ensured that they got medical care and help with family problems. When the time came—once in her household, they almost always stayed—she would provide for their old age. In return, she expected and got loyalty and respect.

Chalern became my severest critic and most loyal friend, and God help the person who criticized me in front of her. That she was truly a great lady became even clearer during the last two years of her life. Terminally ill and in great pain, she nevertheless managed to be always cheerful and had not the slightest hint of self-pity. Her consideration for me extended to arranging for an elderly relative to join our household during her last illness; she wanted someone from the family to be there to keep house for me after she was gone.

Even our children—James and Letha—affectionately referred to their mother as “the chief.” She knew they did this but understood the spirit in which they said it. Both born at Hua Hin, they knew Thai before they learned English, and even now they are fully bilingual. Although they have married and live with their families in the United States, they remain close to their Thai cousins.



Chapter 6

“A crocodile lives there!”: Learning Jungle Warfare

“One of my abiding concerns, both in border operations in Thailand and during my years with the Hmong resistance force in Laos, was balancing the competing equities of cultural self-determination and political and economic integration.”



A current view of the Pran River south of Hua Hin. The river leads to the location of a site for PARU training in mountainous, dense jungle terrain.

By late 1954, the Airborne Royal Guard had demonstrated some competence and élan, and our superiors pronounced themselves happy with our performance. Nevertheless, Pranet and I recognized that, at just company strength, the unit was too small to become a significant force either in border security operations or as a potential instrument of foreign intervention. In addition, we lacked the jungle facility necessary both to train new recruits and to maintain the proficiency of the existing complement.

I thought it premature to ask General Phao to let us expand the unit, but there was nothing to prevent our building a jungle training camp. One of the first things I had discovered about our young Thai policemen during training at Lop Buri was that they were initially almost helpless in the dense jungle that covers so much of their country. Most Thai live on rice-growing lowlands, and, for many of them, the jungle is a strange and fearsome thing. A few of our resistance trainees had done a little hunting, but not even they had the skills needed to survive, let alone to pursue bandits or subversives, in the dense vegetation that covered most of the mountains—and, except along the lower Mekong, Thailand's inland borders run mostly through mountainous terrain.

Our immediate task was to find a site close to Hua Hin that offered the kind of mountainous jungle terrain in which we would be working. I called for one of the CAT C-47s, and Pranet, Jeff, and I took off from the old Hua Hin airstrip and headed south. Even before reaching cruising altitude, we saw the mouth of the Pran River, which flows into the Gulf of Thailand from the west. We banked and turned to follow it inland to the point, a few miles from the coast, where it turns north and parallels the mountain chain that forms the spine of the Kra Isthmus.

Had we followed the Pran River and proceeded north past its headwaters, we would have flown over the River Quai and the site of the infamous World War II railroad bridge built by the Japanese using brutalized prisoners of war. I did not intend to go that far, as our map reconnaissance suggested that we would find a suitable site to the west of Hua Hin on a mountain slope between the Pran River and the Burmese border. After only an hour or two of reconnoitering, we found what we were looking for, a valley on a small stream, level enough for a camp.

One thing was certain: getting to the site, surrounded by hills covered with double-canopy forest, would test the motivation and conditioning of our men. If they made it, their pride and esprit de corps would get a boost. There was no point in creating artificial difficulties, for there would be obstacles enough. Therefore, when we set out with the two rifle platoons—the Pathfinders stayed behind to finish camp construction—we used the logging trail that served the sawmill at Hua Hin. Its owner, a Thai businessman named Suchai, maintained it in order

to send his old British army four-wheel-drive trucks as far into the hills as possible to carry out hardwood logs during the dry season.

During the three-day march to Nong Plop, the last village before the Pran River, we discovered the enormous variety of wild game still inhabiting the Hua Hin portion of the isthmus. We saw the tracks of tigers, panthers, and wild elephants as we traversed the stands of bamboo that separated the small villages of Thai subsistence farmers. At one point, almost stunned by a sudden thunderous roar, we stood transfixed as a herd of some 30 elephants crossed the trail where it passed through a bamboo thicket. We had probably interrupted a meal, for bamboo leaves are a staple part of the elephant diet. Later, we shot a large sambar deer, which supplied us with several meals.

At Nong Plop, we found Mr. Suchai. As much a hunter as a businessman, he had a day or two earlier shot an adult female leopard as it attacked a baby elephant, injuring one of its rear legs. Near the dead leopard he'd found a new-born kitten, its eyes still closed. Suchai now had two helpless animals on his hands. He solved his problem, with our ready agreement, by donating both to Camp Narasuan. The next truck took the elephant and the leopard kit to the care of the startled Pathfinders. The elephant became the coddled camp mascot, and I kept the leopard in a cage outside my house until it got so large that, despite its docile behavior, I feared it would break out and start making off with the neighborhood children. At that point, I donated it to the Royal Zoo in Bangkok.

The logging trail ended at Nong Plop. Knowing the area well, Suchai offered to walk with us to the first Karen village, which lay just west of the Pran River. There, he would introduce us to Karen tribesmen to serve as guides. We waded across the clear, cold water of the Pran, looking up at the 200-foot trees that arched over it from both sides. Gibbons called to each other, and hornbills and other brilliantly colored birds flew in and out among the trees. There was no trace of human habitat. Suchai obviously felt entirely at home in this ancient jungle, but the rest of us felt the thrill of discovery; it was as if no one had seen it before us.

A couple of hours later, we came upon a small Karen village. Everything looked peaceful; cooking pots simmered over small wood fires. Nevertheless, we had the sense of being the only people in the jungle, for not one person was to be seen. We wandered around, taking care not to touch anything. Suchai confirmed what we had guessed: the villagers, seeing our weapons, had taken refuge in the forest from which, while remaining invisible, they kept watch on us.

The villagers knew Suchai, however, and his presence, together with our respect for their homes and property, helped persuade them of our peaceful intent. They gradually filtered back into the clearing. Jeff and I drew a crowd, relatively speaking, because some of them, although not 50 miles from the beach resort at Hua Hin, had never seen a white man. Jeff was long since accustomed to such attention and just smiled as they pointed and whispered at the sight of his enormous bulk and pink skin.

This encounter brought home to me a point that I had previously understood only in the abstract. The upland tribal inhabitants of Southeast Asia had forever found themselves at the mercy of anyone with a gun. The dominant lowland populations of the area were more likely

to oppress and exploit them than treat them as compatriots. Government protection was days away even if the government was disposed to provide it, so they had no one to look to for security except their own villages. They were vulnerable to the blandishments of anyone, communist subversive or drug-running bandit, who offered protection in exchange for food or early warning about the approach of soldiers or police.

The isolation of these unsophisticated people was thus a double-edged sword. It helped them maintain their autonomy, indeed, their very identity. At the same time, it perpetuated their weakness. Although spared the burden of paying taxes or serving in the army, they had in effect deprived themselves of the protections that constitute the main purpose of civil government. One of my abiding concerns, both in border operations in Thailand and during my years with the Hmong resistance force in Laos, was balancing the competing equities of cultural self-determination and political and economic integration.

Suchai's rapport with the Karen made it easy to recruit two guides, and with them we headed farther west. After four days of sometimes grueling climbs, we reached a small valley on the slope of the central chain of mountains. It had been cut into the slope by a stream known as the Huai Sat Yai (Big Beast Creek). The higher elevation cooled the ocean air as it came in during the monsoon, producing continual heavy rainfall and the growth of a double-tiered hardwood tree canopy. The lower level of these trees reached about 150 feet above the ground; the second soared to a height that we estimated at 230 feet. The sun never penetrated the dense foliage, but the ground was covered with ferns and other plants that require little light.

In the center of the valley, the Huai Sat Yai had created a large deep pool of clear water that looked most inviting after a week on the march. Without further delay, we all stripped down and jumped in. Only Pranet noticed that our Karen guides did not join us. He approached one who knew some Thai and asked if the two did not want to join us. The Karen replied that he thought a crocodile lives there, a giant one he had seen just two days earlier. We climbed out faster than we had jumped in before asking why he had not warned us. He replied matter-of-factly that we had not asked him.

Once asked, the Karen proved most helpful. We wanted to learn how to survive and operate in the jungle, and there could be no better teachers than the people who lived there. We hired several of them, and they taught us how to weave durable, water-tight roofing from a grass called *jahk*, which grows along stream beds. We fastened it to frames made of split bamboo held together with vines. Split bamboo, flattened to make a fairly even surface, served as walls and flooring. In this way, we raised a barracks and a mess hall in a matter of days. It was very pleasant to get dry once again; a poncho offers little protection from continual tropical cloudbursts.

The question of local food sources presented no great difficulty. Migratory farmers had lived in the area for many years, leaving behind trees such as papaya and root plants such as taro and potatoes. In this locale, we could eat a reasonably balanced diet without resort to supply from the outside.

We could hardly count on such good fortune elsewhere, so I spent much time with our Thai-speaking guide learning how the Karen hunted and how they cultivated their root vegetables. He seemed flattered by my interest, perhaps because, as he told me, Jeff and I were—as I'd suspected—the first white men ever seen in this area. On hearing this, I felt a thrill of discovery like the one I'd felt crossing the Pran River. The line, “Dr. Livingstone, I presume,” resonated in my head.

We tried to reciprocate Karen kindness. Because we were not yet ready to provide educational or economic resources or advice, we relied primarily on the medical aid station to ingratiate ourselves with the villagers. The new camp physician, Captain Sangsit, had trekked to Huai Sat Yai with us, and, when he was not busy with the cuts, abrasions, and digestive upsets of our men, he tended to the villagers' complaints.

This was so well received that word spread to other Karen villages, producing a demand that we could not always fulfill. One night, we were sitting around the camp fire when a Karen from another village approached with our guide. A woman in a distant hamlet was seriously ill, and our visitor wanted the doctor to come. Jeff, always at the service of the unfortunate, urged Dr. Sangsit to start off at once. Sangsit begged off. “There is someone sick in any direction you point,” he said, “and I cannot help them all.”

Sangsit was right, of course. Besides, Pranet and I wouldn't have let him go without an escort, and we couldn't spare the men. Jeff, as compassionate as he was sometimes impractical, was outraged. (Later, in Laos, Jeff shared a house with Jack Shirley and the former secretary to the CIA chief in Bangkok. One day, Jeff found a sick Lao man lying by the road. Jeff picked him up, brought him home, and put him to bed in Ethyl's room. Ethyl was fit to be tied when she got home and saw her guest; Jeff never explained why he offered up her bed rather than his own.)

I cannot claim that we achieved instant and total self-reliance during our first trek to the new jungle camp. We used our radio—a cumbersome, World War II–vintage agent apparatus with a hand-cranked generator—to request an airdrop of tools, nails, and supplementary food items. Nevertheless, we made an immediate start at building practical skills, strengthening the unit's ethos, and refining its professional style.

The first order of business was learning to operate during the wet season. My Thai colleagues insisted it couldn't be done, that neither men nor equipment could function in the torrential monsoon rains. This had to be a mistake. I had already read a book, *The Jungle is Neutral*, by a British officer named Frederick Spencer Chapman, who had spent all of World War II eluding the Japanese in the jungles of Malaya. If he could do it, we could too.

It was just a matter of finding ways to adapt. The Thai were right about one thing: it was intolerable to be wet all the time. We therefore adopted a practice of taking two sets of clothing on patrol, wearing one and carrying the other in a waterproof plastic package. Each man also carried a shelter half, two of which combined to make an old-fashioned US army pup tent. When we stopped for the night, we first set up tents then built a fire in front of each, for we had learned to start a fire no matter how wet the ground. We hung our wet clothing at the entrance to the tent near the fire and slept in the dry clothing. The next morning, we put the damp gear back on and packed up the dry. This continued for the duration of the patrol.

No matter how much knowledge we gleaned from experts like Chapman, we had to learn some things on our own. Snakes of many varieties, most of them poisonous, abounded in the jungles and even the towns of Thailand. One evening just before dark, as we were setting up camp on a training march, platoon leader Somboon walked out into the jungle to relieve himself. Suddenly, right in front of him, appeared a king cobra, hooded in anger. It was so large that it stood taller than Somboon, and it terrified him in a way he'd never before experienced. He was a superb marksman, however, and had enough presence of mind to draw and fire. The bullet broke the snake's spine just below its head, killing it instantly.

A king cobra can raise half its length off the ground. The one that had loomed over Somboon was 12 feet long. Looking at his enormous trophy, Somboon remembered Thai folklore. Cobras mate for life, it was said, and, if you killed one, the other would come looking for you. Following tradition, he cut off the cobra's head and buried it so that its mate would not recognize the rest of the body. Tradition did not guarantee that this would suffice, so, while the patrol camped at that site, Somboon slept in the center of a circle formed by his men. The idea was that the vengeful cobra would wake one of them if it tried to reach the killer of its mate.

When we began our jungle training, I had feared that snakes would pose a real hazard. The incident with Somboon notwithstanding, I learned that my concern was exaggerated. Even the most poisonous snake prefers to avoid confrontation and will move away from the sound of a man moving toward it. The only exception is the cobra, which will attack anyone or anything that approaches its nest during the July–August nesting season.

After medical science developed freeze-dried antitoxin, our medics always carried it on jungle patrol. In fact, during the entire course of my career, only one of our troopers was bitten by a snake, and that happened in Hua Hin. A private named Suthep picked up a snake he had found along the road and discovered too late that it was venomous. Medical treatment was at hand and saved his life after a couple of days of really painful illness.



We never knew when we might be deployed outside Thailand with no means of resupply from Hua Hin. Accordingly, we built on the information furnished by our Karen guides at Huai Sat Yai and experimented with various crops. One of the most successful was a fast-growing, hardy, and high-yield bean that served as a high-protein meat substitute.

Many aspects of jungle subsistence were surprising. We discovered, for example, that water buffalo, a domestic animal of the lowlands, flourished in the jungle if introduced in sufficient numbers to protect themselves. When threatened, a herd would form a circle of adult animals, sheltering the young within as their horns confronted the predator outside. I bought a small herd from the villagers and released the animals to subsist on their own. They increased and multiplied as the Karen had promised me they would, growing to at least 400 head. As a result, although we learned how to survive without meat, at Huai Sat Yai we abstained only part of the time and then only for training purposes.

Knowing what the individual trooper can and cannot do becomes progressively more important as the size of the combat element shrinks. Deploying a squad of only seven men, as I proposed to do, put a premium on individual performance. I therefore set out to measure, as systematically as I could, our physical capacities.

In this area too, there were surprises. One involved night vision, which, given our emphasis on night operations, had to be a known quantity. We experimented to find out how long it took the eye to adapt from light to dark and what could be seen under specified degrees of darkness: overcast, new moon, full moon, etc. One interesting discovery involved the age at which night vision capability begins to decline; we found that this usually occurs before a man reaches thirty.

Huai Sat Yai also served as the testing ground for techniques such as parachuting into a jungle canopy. The enormous trees forming the top canopy were 12 to 20 feet in diameter at the base; there were no branches lower than about 200 feet. Unless a jumper had a device that enabled him to descend from such heights, he would dangle helplessly in the air. I had studied a technique used by the US Forest Service, and we adapted it, using a 220-foot length of military webbing fastened to the parachute at one end and a kind of saddle at the other. Once assured that the parachute canopy was firmly lodged in the foliage, the jumper would lower himself to the ground, using a simple braking device to control the rate of descent.

We had not yet perfected the technique when we first explored the site at Huai Sat Yai, but we thought our clearing large enough for a jumper. At my behest, one of the pathfinders tried it. He missed the clearing and wound up dangling from one of the gigantic trees, more than two hundred feet off the ground.

I don't know what we'd have done had our Karen guides not come to the rescue. We discovered that they had developed a climbing technique that they used to recover honey deposited by bee colonies near the treetops. They demonstrated that technique to get our pathfinder out of his predicament. Using an ancient brace and bit, a Karen climber bored a hole in the trunk and drove in a bamboo spike. Standing on that spike and leaning on a fiber strap strung around the trunk, he drove another spike farther up and, using the strap, hitched himself up to his next perch. He proceeded with astonishing speed, one spike after another, until he had reached our man snared in the foliage canopy. He tossed over the webbing we had sent with him, and the pathfinder secured it to a branch and very nervously lowered himself to safety.

One development at Huai Sat Yai had to remain undisclosed for the duration of my professional association with Pranet. As I've said, we had become genuine friends at Lop Buri, and he knew that my regard for him had led to his assignment to the Airborne Royal Guard. The weeks together at the new jungle camp solidified this bond, and it became clear that we shared the same vision of the unit's future. We had to anticipate future demands and get ready to meet them, whether or not our masters recognized the potential need. The only basis for cooperation in such an endeavor was unconditional mutual trust.

Accordingly, we made a secret compact that carried us through the following years of security operations in Thailand and the subsequent war in Laos. We agreed that, whatever the course of action we were considering, we would look at it from the perspectives of our

respective governments. If each considered it to be in the interests of his country, we would pursue it—if necessary, without asking for permission.

I am not talking here about any kind of rogue operation. We never initiated any operation without orders from at least one of our governments. Rather, our pact concerned the organization and training of our unit and the contingency planning necessary to assure its successful deployment. If we did not take the initiative, nothing would happen; higher authority on both sides was too preoccupied with short term problems to give us long-term guidance.

Such reciprocal trust created risks, especially for Pranet. I would occasionally circumvent regulations on construction by diverting a little money from the troops' subsistence payment to build a classroom. SEA Supply put results over bureaucratic niceties, and I doubted that anyone would really care about such trifles, let alone punish me.

For Pranet, it was a little different. We were operating on Thai territory, and technically he should get his superiors' permission for anything we did. It happened—only rarely, fortunately—that the United States wanted a direct return on its modest investment in Camp Narasuan. Once, in 1957 or 1958, I got an urgent message to report to the CIA chief in Bangkok. SEA Supply had just been dissolved, and the Agency chief in Bangkok now directly supervised the US government interest in our unit. He told me that "something is going on" on the island of Sumatra, Indonesia, and that Washington wanted supplies air-dropped there.

The two aircraft to be used would be twin-engine C-46, which had more than double the capacity of the C-47 that PARU normally used and a correspondingly longer range. The planes on this mission would nevertheless require refueling in South Thailand before proceeding to the drop. I was ordered to find a suitable site and make arrangements in such a way that nothing about the mission appeared in Thai communications channels.

As it happened, Pranet and I had stationed a team in Narathiwat, almost at the Malaysian border in the far south of the Kra Isthmus. Next to our BIC was an airstrip built during the Japanese occupation and unused since World War II. I had checked it when I visited the team and found the concrete intact. To ensure a safe landing, we needed only clear it of grazing cattle before an aircraft arrived. The planes would arrive in darkness, but we were already experienced in the use of flashlights to signal the location of a strip and guide a plane in for a landing.

Back at Camp Narasuan, I told Pranet what was up. I did not tell him where the aircraft were headed, and he did not ask. He understood that I was implicitly asking him to keep the matter between us and that my request meant no damage to Thai interests would result. Accordingly, we turned directly to the mechanics of our support to the mission.

We headed to the BIC in Narathiwat, where Pranet briefed the team on the secrecy of the mission. He sent men to the local market to buy aviation gasoline and hand pumps, and we set up the reception plan. Pranet and I gave the BIC chief an innocuous radio message to signal "mission accomplished" and returned to Hua Hin.

The two C-46s appeared on schedule, and our men were pleasantly surprised to find two of their old SEA Supply advisers among the crew. The episode ended at that point, not to be opened until the 1990s, when I was serving on a committee designated to write a history of the Border Patrol Police, by then the parent organization to the Hua Hin unit. When the chairman of the committee, retired Police Director General Surapol, asked for interesting anecdotes, an old retired PARU mentioned the Narathiwat caper. Surapol had of course never heard of it, and Pranet and I said nothing. Surapol directed that a note be made of it for possible use.

Pranet would never have consented to anything that damaged Thai interests. His cooperation rested entirely on his confidence that CIA had both a legitimate Cold War purpose in such a mission and a valid reason not to raise it officially with the authorities in Bangkok. In any case, he saw that Thai officials and politicians often put personal or factional advantage above the national interest. Determined to apply a more elevated standard to his own work, he adopted the monarchy as the object of his loyalty. He admired and respected King Bhumipol and might ignore an order from the government if he was confident that in so doing he served the king's values. He did so without ever lobbying or currying favor with the Palace. The honors and benefits that came to him at the end of his career were honestly and selflessly won.

On a more practical level, Pranet understood my need to prove to Washington that our unit could meet an urgent need, even one not specified in our charter. He assumed that the secrecy in this case reflected an American perception that his government would prefer not to know what the operation was about. Characteristically willing to put his neck on the block, he gave his OK.

I did not often have to put Pranet at such risk with his superiors. When it came to matters of common concern, Phao expected from him what CIA expected from me: Pranet and I should each solve our own problems in ways that respected the equities of the other party. This did not mean that either of us had a blank check, but it did mean that the Thai government—or General Phao, at least—was prepared to give Pranet the same kind of autonomy that I enjoyed. That, more than anything else, made the whole thing work.



Chapter 7

Evolution of Tribal Integration and Border Security Strategies

“The expansion of the unit inaugurated the most fulfilling period of my life. The freedom Pranet and I enjoyed to shape our unit and indoctrinate our men solidified our friendship, the closest and most enduring I have ever had.”



Training was intended to instill the “all for one and one for all” spirit in recruits unaccustomed to military order and discipline. Development of PARU included “the most fulfilling period of [Lair’s] life.”

I have gotten a little ahead of my story. By the end of 1954, the success of our Chiang Mai operations against opium smugglers had won us something of a name in the Thai security establishment. More important, if less visible to my American and Thai superiors, was our progress toward acquiring a unique set of skills. I knew that our training regime at Camp Narasuan and Huai Sat Yai had us well on the road to a capability that no other Thai security organization had ever even tried to master.

At this point, however, we lacked a formula that would combine border security work with contingency preparations for deployment in one or another of Thailand's neighbors. Having entrusted us with the development of the new unit, our respective masters implicitly relied on Pranet and me to create a strategy for its deployment.

We recognized that either kind of operation would require the cooperation of one or another of the non-Thai tribes inhabiting the country's remote mountain borders. The problem lay in finding ways to get these fiercely independent peoples to identify themselves as Thai citizens and subjects of the king. No Royal Thai government organ had ever succeeded in this; perhaps none had ever seriously tried. Mutual incomprehension and mistrust had persisted for so long that accommodation might well be impossible.

The friendly, if initially wary, reception by the Karen around Huai Sat Yai suggested otherwise, but, in any case, we saw no alternative. Pranet and I began an intensive study of the ways in which the tribes saw themselves and their relationship to other tribes and to the lowland Thai.

We sent platoon-strength patrols along stretches of mountainous frontier, mostly across from Burma but also along the Laotian and Cambodian borders, which had never known a government presence. These patrols made detailed observations, not just for tactical purposes—such as potential campsites and parachute drop zones—but also of the tribesmen they found along the way. These included Shan, Kachin, and Karen, interspersed at points with Chinese Nationalist remnants. We wanted to know the names of clan and village leaders, the nature of their communications along and across the border, and, where possible, their attitudes toward the national governments on each side of the frontier. To all this we added requirements for information on tribal organization and economics.

These explorations, added to our own dealings with tribesmen, showed us that many of these people understood perfectly well their harsh lot in life. Proud of their ancient cultures, they nevertheless saw the disadvantages of illiteracy and of the semi-nomadic life imposed on them by the slash-and-burn agriculture that so quickly exhausted the poor soil of the mountains. They did indeed cherish their independence, but this reflected in part the exploitation and abuse that they had come to expect from the stronger lowland populations on both sides of the border. They found themselves perpetually at the mercy not only of the

majority populations but also the societal outcasts who roamed the hills as bandits or political dissidents.

In the mid-1950s, when I began working among them, there was still sporadic violence. The Royal Thai government, traditionally hostile to the Burmese, tolerated the Karen as a buffer even as it worried about possible Karen vulnerability to communist influence. Bangkok also wanted to avoid provoking needless tension with the Ne Win regime in Burma and was thus driven to limit as far as possible the use of Thai territory by tribesmen in rebellion against Rangoon.

As it was, bands of such rebels controlled most of Burma's border with Thailand, and there was an illicit economy in which the tribesmen sold native products, including opium and its derivatives, to finance their resistance. A good many Thai made their living in this contraband trade with the mountain people, who cut teak logs to float downstream or brought out of the mountains gemstones or ores containing precious metals.

Other tribes had somewhat different histories, but Pranet and I concluded that we could accomplish three things with a single organizational device. A long-term Airborne Royal Guard presence along key stretches of the border would build the encyclopedic area knowledge we needed, inhibit banditry and subversion, and encourage tribesmen living on Thai territory to adopt the monarchy as a benevolent authority. Meanwhile, friendly relations with the tribesmen living in Burma would improve Thai security and enable us to monitor and perhaps inhibit rebel activity. We gave the projected long-term presence the intentionally innocuous name Border Information Center (BIC). The first BIC came in early 1955. Using the facilities at Huai Sat Yai for a base camp, we staffed it with a squad from the platoon that had conducted the initial area reconnaissance.

We had already discovered that the villagers had much to teach us, but there were things we could do for them, too. To this end, we prepared the BIC to provide various services. Through the good offices of King Bhumibol, we had sent some men for special training at the Ministries of Education and Agriculture. The result was several Royal Guardsmen who knew enough about mountain agriculture to help the villagers plant more suitable crops and get better yields from what they were already growing. Others were prepared to teach arithmetic and the Thai language at the first-grade level. Meanwhile, the medic would treat simple maladies and encourage the villagers to adopt basic sanitation practices.

We applied this same formula at our second BIC, the location of which came about more or less by chance. I was patrolling with a squad near Ban Umpang, just east of the Burmese border and about 200 kilometers north of Huai Sat Yai, when we overtook a small caravan of oxcarts and elephants. The new district chief was moving his family to Ban Umpang. We joined the party for lunch, and the new official—headed for what he knew would be a rather lonely assignment—encouraged us to set up a permanent presence near the District Headquarters.

This was an active sector of the border already under consideration as the site of our second center. Accordingly, upon my return to Hua Hin, I began working with Pranet to staff and equip the new center, which would be installed at the border some three kilometers west of the District Headquarters at Ban Umpang.

The population of the area included both Karen and Thai, and both groups had relatives on the Burmese side of the unmarked border. The new center set out to establish a benevolent presence, with one of its seven men teaching reading and arithmetic and the medic running a daily sick call. People came from both sides of the border, which meant little to them anyway, to take advantage of the first such services ever offered them.

Success came so quickly and so dramatically that the local Karen rebel regiment began to feel its local influence threatened. Its commander decided simply to wipe out the alien presence, but friendly Karen villagers, some with relatives in the regiment, came to warn our men. The squad manning the center would be vastly outnumbered, but its leader—a tough little former boxer and judo fighter from south Thailand named Santi Intarakorn—reacted with his usual composure. Santi realized that, even allowing for an exaggerated estimate of the raiding party, his squad faced being overwhelmed. The warning had given him just enough time to take all of his equipment—weapons, radio gear, schoolroom aids—into hiding in the jungle. Everything else could be quickly replaced using local materials. The Karen rebels attacked but found only an empty camp, which they burned. The next day villagers from both sides of the border came unbidden to rebuild it.

Not long after this incident, Pranet and I visited Ban Umpang to see the District Chief and our men in the BIC. As it happened, the principal Karen rebel leader, Saw Hunter Tamui, had arrived on the Burmese side of the border at just the same time. He quickly got word of our presence and sent a messenger with an invitation to a “state dinner” at his camp. Given the recent attack on our local center, I could not be sure that this was not a trap, but it seemed unlikely that the rebels would want to antagonize the US government by harming one of its nationals. The opportunity was in any case unique, and Pranet and I couldn’t resist.

The “prime minister”—for so he was addressed—sent a rebel squad to escort us to his temporary headquarters, a camp on the Burmese side of the border. He and his retinue were constantly on the move to avoid capture by the Burmese army, but this camp was a more-or-less permanent installation, manned by a small garrison. It even had electric power, enough for a few feeble bulbs in the main hut, from a generator driven by the waterfall next to the campsite.

Saw Hunter Tamui clearly had in mind only a diplomatic offensive. He treated Pranet like an ambassador with plenipotentiary powers and me like a royal guest. A graduate of an English university—Cambridge, I think he said—he regaled us in upper-class English with his people’s history and current grievances. We were already familiar with most of it, but it was fascinating to hear it as we dined off porcelain plates with silver flatware in a hut roofed with banana leaves.

We listened politely as our host told us why the Karen felt doubly betrayed in their perennial struggle with the lowland Burmese. First, they had allied themselves with the British, fighting alongside them in World War II, while the Burmese collaborated with the Japanese invader. When the British granted Burma’s independence, the Karen wanted their own independent state. They did not get it, and resentment of what they saw as British perfidy still festered.

The Americans, too, had betrayed the Karen. Most of the tribesmen had been converted to Christianity by American Baptist missionaries in the 19th century, and a continuing connection had led them to expect US support for their political aspirations after World War II. Here too they were disappointed.

I was perhaps not entirely objective about the Burmese minorities. My SEA Supply boss in Bangkok, Pete Joost, had led the Kachen Rangers during World War II. He knew what the mountain tribes had done to support the Allies, and he could never comprehend how the postwar Labor government in Britain could have ceded control of Burma to the very people who had so willingly collaborated with the Japanese. A government of lowland Burmese, he was sure, would only abuse the mountain tribes further.

Saw Hunter Tamui graciously exempted Pranet and me from any share of the blame for these misfortunes and apologized for the raid on our center. He said he was grateful for Thailand's discreet cooperation in the border trade and could guarantee that no further such incidents would occur—and they didn't. The security of remote Thai borders still rests on such tacit accommodations, fostered by the benevolent police presence that we began constructing in 1954.



Even at its greatest strength—a light battalion of some 400 men—our unit could never have patrolled all of Thailand's borders. This was obvious to General Phao, who, a year or so after creating the Airborne Royal Guard, accepted additional assistance from SEA Supply to set up a more conventional border police. That force, which would become almost eight times larger than ours, assumed responsibility for the more accessible frontiers and, over time, took over the staffing of certain well-established BICs. We would then extend our coverage to areas still without a Thai government presence.

The core of our operational concept was mobility. Pranet and I established a practice in which a platoon was assigned to a stretch of border about 100 kilometers long. Half the platoon would set up an information center as a base and then start visiting the villages in its jurisdiction. After 60 to 90 days, depending on the harshness of the terrain, this element would return to Hua Hin for rest and more training. The other half would replace it and go into areas not yet covered. We found that by rotating our men in this way we could survey the entire 100-kilometer segment within about a year, getting usefully detailed information on the topography and villages—ethnic composition, tribal leaders, and economic activity. These findings became the basis of a continuing effort both to determine local political loyalties and to popularize the Thai monarchy with a constituency both ethnically and geographically remote. The king's charities adopted many of the schools we built near BICs, and regular government agencies also helped them become a permanent part of the communities they served.

In terms of both political loyalties and social progress, it really worked. Many years later, in 1990 and 1991, I visited a number of villages along the Cambodian border in an area infested with Khmer Rouge communists. Not one of the villages served by a police-sponsored school supported the communists. The insurgents, who elsewhere had acquired influence

either by propaganda or by coercion, saw that neither tactic would win in communities where King Bhumibol enjoyed such affection and respect.

None of this meant that we saw social service as the purpose of our work. Thai security was always the main point. The continuously updated information on political, social, and economic conditions in adjacent portions of Thailand's neighbors laid the groundwork for political or armed competition with communist guerrillas on either side of the border. We anticipated possible requirements to intervene outside Thailand, and our intelligence program and contingency planning allowed us to hit the ground running when we went to Laos in late 1960. We knew that the people inhabiting remote areas of adjacent countries were much like the mountain tribes in Thailand. The methods we developed for attracting the loyalty of inhabitants of Thailand should work just as well when it came time for us to be deployed outside Thailand.

Herein lay the American interest in the project, for Thailand was then, as it is now, the most important state on the Southeast Asian mainland. In 1954, all of its neighbors harbored dangerous insurgent groups, most of them communist. The Viet Minh in Vietnam, the Pathet Lao in Laos, and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia all threatened the survival of weak regimes left behind by the French colonialists. In the north, as I've already noted, remnants of Chinese Nationalist armies defeated by Mao in 1949 still lingered in remote mountain valleys of Thailand and Burma, and their presence continually threatened to provoke a military reaction from Beijing.

Our freedom to experiment permitted us to make a start at asserting some Thai government control in these areas. Although the Thai underwrote the bulk of the overall expenses, it was the modest US investment—only \$80,000 a year until the commitment to the war in Laos—that gave us the flexibility we needed to test and refine our concepts and techniques. This support also facilitated immediate response to unforeseen requirements. Some of these were tangential to our security mission, but we had to be able to meet them if we were to retain long-term support from both governments. Quick, if small-scale, disaster relief and emergency medical evacuation of civilian victims were among these contingencies, and we eventually added an air-sea rescue capability.

The modest subsistence allowance—just half a dollar per man per day—permitted an occasional public relations gesture that helped cement relations with the civilians among whom our men worked. Once, for example, we included in the monthly airdrop a gallon or two of ice cream for each BIC to share with villagers, most of whom had never even heard of this delicacy.



By the end of 1954, the Airborne Royal Guard was spread thin, operating mostly along the mountainous frontier with Burma but also opposite Laos and Cambodia. We had already begun turning well-established BICs over to the regular Border Patrol Police, but many areas harbored bandits or Thai communists or dissidents from across the frontiers.

It had become our unofficial charter to show the Thai flag in such places, but our three companies were now fully committed. We would need at least another company in order to open up new centers while we consolidated the work of the BICs opened after the one at Ban Umpang.

General Phao had already signaled his readiness to consider beefing up the unit, so we had little concern about that. The problem was the source of recruits. The police normally selected applicants from towns and cities, where young men with sufficient education were easy to find. Conventional training posed another difficulty, for aspiring policemen were trained in Bangkok under a regimen that assumed their later deployment in the municipalities from which they came.

Pranet and I agreed that the solution was an independent recruiting program that would allow us to bypass the police bureaucracy and go directly to the border areas. We would pick our men using our own standards—bachelors, 18 to 23 years of age, with a high-school education—and subject them to the same intensive screening undergone by the 50 men we'd brought back from the provinces to complete the first company. This strategy offered us the best chance of finding men with the right aptitudes and motivation, not to mention the right dialects and area knowledge.

Training posed a similar problem. The Airborne Royal Guard was to represent an entirely new ethos in the Thai police establishment, and I did not want new recruits spoiled by attending the basic training that the Police Education Department conducted in Bangkok. Instructors could come to Hua Hin to give the required courses in conventional law enforcement, but it was essential that we run our own program.

We were asking General Phao to suspend his own recruiting and training regulations in our favor. The outcome was not foreordained, for he was getting stiff resistance from the general commanding the Education Department. Phao subjected Pranet and me to some sharp questioning, wondering why we could not take rookies who graduated from conventional training and then mold them into Airborne Royal Guardsmen at Camp Narasuan. We stood our ground, arguing that esprit de corps was everything and that it had to be instilled right from the beginning. We made a major issue of the need for men from border areas, and Phao finally acceded. We were free to begin doubling the size of the unit.

We proposed to recruit 10 men from each of 10 sensitive areas along the Thai borders with Burma, Laos, and Cambodia and set out to attract applicants. I wanted to communicate the unique style and mission of the Airborne Royal Guard from the very first moment of contact with potential recruits. Accordingly, I called for the C-47, and we dropped recruiting leaflets over border towns that boasted high schools and thus, presumably, a supply of eligible young men. A recruiting team would then parachute into each of these border towns to administer tests for mental aptitude and physical stamina. The ploy served its purpose, giving our unit a high profile and attracting the more adventurous of the local youth. We got well over a thousand applicants for our 100 positions and easily met our hiring goal without having to compromise on the matter of quality.

When the new men arrived at Hua Hin, we immediately set out to instill the “all for one and one for all” spirit of the Airborne Royal Guard. Pranet and I would meet them at the

railroad or bus station at Hua Hin, send their baggage to camp on a truck, and then lead them on the three-mile run to camp. Not everyone made it through the demanding training regimen that followed—a few didn't even manage the run to camp—but better men quickly took their place.

The expansion of the unit inaugurated the most fulfilling period of my life. The freedom Pranet and I enjoyed to shape our unit and indoctrinate our men solidified our friendship, the closest and most enduring I have ever had. The bond between us was reinforced by our commitment to our self-assigned mission and by the us-against-the-world spirit that this sometimes engendered. We understood very well that we still had something to prove, and the determination to prove it cemented our solidarity.

When I married in 1954, our friendship grew into something like an extended family. I am still “uncle” to Pranet's six children, and my wife and his became equally close. Together, we went through good times and bad. Unlike many of his peers, Pranet never exploited his rank—he would become a major general—for personal gain either during active service or after retirement.

One of the highlights of this period was a visit by Allen Dulles, then director of central intelligence. Interested in all facets of anti-communist security operations, he had heard of the innovative Airborne Royal Guard and asked for a look at our operation. He may have wound up getting closer to it than he intended, but he displayed fortitude and good sportsmanship throughout.

We had leveled a helicopter landing site at Huai Sat Yai, and the National Police had just acquired two Hiller helicopters, tiny birds that could carry only the pilot and two passengers. One of these brought Dulles and Walter Kuzmuk, then chief of SEA Supply in Bangkok, to the camp. Pranet and I followed in the other. Dachar was then commanding the camp, and I had radioed him to prepare for the visit.

I took no active part in the proceedings. Dachar received the party and in his clear, though idiosyncratic, English briefed Dulles with all the confidence of a professional. He explained our mission and training regime and our emphasis on long-term survival in the jungle. Dulles asked why we thought this necessary. Dachar replied that he and all the Airborne Royal Guard expected the communist Chinese eventually to move against Thailand. A jungle-based resistance would then become imperative. We might also, he said, be ordered to organize anti-communist guerrilla forces in one or another of Thailand's neighbors. Dulles said he shared that view.

The camp cook had fixed a lunch exclusively from locally produced ingredients, and Dulles bravely sampled almost everything, including dried buffalo meat, boiled roots, and—a special delicacy—roast python. He declined, however, to try the fried termites. He seemed genuinely fascinated by Huai Sat Yai and by our joint Thai-American program and told me on his departure that he had just spent one of the most delightful days of his life.



Chapter 8

PARU Under Political Attack

“I visited Washington, where I discovered from the branch chief who supervised Southeast Asia that he intended to recommend terminating CIA support to PARU. In his view, the project was simply not making the kind of direct contribution to Agency objectives that would justify even the modest investment now in effect.”



A coup d'état shook Bangkok in the spring of 1957. Prime Minister Pibul, formerly the darling of the military establishment, had incurred the hostility of General Sarit—shown here in a 1950s photo—the commander of the Royal Thai army and the dominant figure in the entire military and internal security establishment. An army coup meant that General Sarit was now in charge—and that meant that General Phao was out. Given our popular image as Phao's personal instrument, it was only a matter of time before the army sent a force to take over Camp Narasuan. Image from *Memorial book of Field Marshal Sarit Thanara*, public domain.

For three happy and professionally rewarding years after my December 1954 wedding, I built a life with Chalern as I worked with Pranet and other officers to expand and refine our coverage of Thailand's remotest borders. Fears of Chinese invasion continued to recede, and the communists in Hanoi, busy consolidating control over North Vietnam, had not yet moved against South Vietnam and for the moment posed no threat to Laos or Cambodia. There being no immediate threat to Thai borders, we could satisfy our respective bosses just by keeping them up to date on what we were doing. Accordingly, we concentrated on developing a truly expert jungle security force, capable of guerrilla warfare as well as countersubversive police work.

Pranet and I continued to run the outfit pretty much as we saw fit. My reporting to the Bangkok Station consisted of a summary of activity over the past month and what we planned for the next. We increased our coverage of the remote border areas and improved our ability either to oppose guerrilla warfare in Thailand or, if required, to sponsor it in neighboring countries.

We continually toyed with organizational schemes that would make us more effective as a jungle fighting unit. The goal was to become invisible to an enemy; our men should be able to disappear after taking three steps off a jungle trail. They also had to be able to subsist for days on rations they carried with them. To help them survive and fight, we concentrated on developing the techniques and equipment we had first experimented with during the inaugural period at Huai Sat Yai in the mountains near Burma. We worked with food processors in Bangkok to produce dehydrated meals that needed only to be mixed with hot or cold water.

An equally mundane but essential issue was that of footwear. British expert Spencer Chapman stressed its importance in his aforementioned guide to jungle warfare, *The Jungle is Neutral*. Chapman pointed out the vulnerability of human feet moving through trackless, virgin jungle, to be traversed only by walking in mountain streams. When a stream diverged from the desired direction of march, the jungle fighter had to force a path over a neighboring ridge line to a stream bed that led closer to his destination.

Nothing in the Thai inventory, not even the US jungle combat boot, met our needs. So I turned to a Sino-Thai businessman in Bangkok whose son had just earned an engineering degree from an American university. I gave the young man samples from the shoe collection I had amassed—French, British, US, even Chinese—and he analyzed their design and construction. He then tried his hand at a new design and gave me 25 pairs, which I tested on men sent off on jungle patrols. It took a good many revisions, but eventually I got a boot that could be worn in comfort every day of a three-month patrol during the rainy season.

SEA Supply also contributed to several innovations, sending experts to Hua Hin to work with us on things like supply caches and parachute design. Together, we experimented with the packaging of food, weapons, ammunition, and communications gear to see how long these things could be preserved after being buried in the wet ground of Huai Sat Yai. We also tested an early version of the parabolic parachute—now used in its refined form by free-fall jumpers all over the world—and a radio guidance device to steer a bundle of cargo to a drop zone.

Our innovations in technical matters like these helped instill confidence in the men we parachuted into lonely fields, many miles from any human habitation, under orders to make their own way back to civilization. We tried to ensure that they had as much confidence in their leaders as they had in themselves, using radio communications to arrange emergency airdrops or the evacuation of sick or wounded. This kind of trust, reinforced in both training and tactical missions, prepared the men for their biggest test. That would come in early 1961 in the form of deployment without notice into northern Laos, where we were to arm, train, and provide tactical guidance to the Hmong tribesmen. In 1954, however, that test was still a long way off.

Trouble, when it came, had entirely internal causes, namely, a coup d'état that shook Bangkok in the spring of 1957. Prime Minister Pibul, formerly the darling of the military establishment, had incurred the hostility of General Sarit, the commander of the Royal Thai army and the dominant figure in the entire military and internal security establishment. Whether any serious policy differences divided them I do not know, but personal rivalries in the hothouse atmosphere of the small Thai elite often sufficed to produce political upheaval and may well have done so in this case.

One humid evening at Hua Hin, Chalern and I were preparing to leave the next day on home leave when a trooper named Tongchai dashed into the house. Colonel Pranet had just heard that a coup was taking place in Bangkok, and he wanted me at camp headquarters. I ran out with Tongchai but not before telling Chalern that home leave would have to wait.

Our signal center maintained round-the-clock radio contact with the Border Police Center in Bangkok, with which we coordinated all our BIC activity. Our radioman had been chatting in Morse code with the center when the operator there suddenly tapped out a startling message: "The army is coming into the compound." With that, he went off the air.

The radio station of the Thai army then started playing martial music, and, after a couple of hours, an announcer read an official declaration that the army had taken over the government. The public was enjoined to remain calm—but got no further information.

Pranet and I needed no additional information to know that we were in trouble. An army coup meant that General Sarit was now in charge—and that meant that General Phao was out. Given our popular image as Phao's personal instrument—in fact, he had never suggested using us for any ulterior purpose—it was only a matter of time before the army sent a force to take over Camp Narasuan.

Our immediate concern was to prevent bloodshed. We feared that an approaching army unit might open fire on camp security, who would certainly return fire. To eliminate that risk,

we had to avoid surprise. No army unit of any consequence was located anywhere along the Malay Peninsula to the south, so we expected that any trouble would come from the infantry regiment stationed at Petchaburi, about 70 kilometers to the north. We sent out two small teams, each with a radio, one to the north and one—just to be sure—to the south. Nothing happened. For several days, we saw and heard nothing; both Border Police and National Police radios were silent.

Finally, I got a commercial telegram from Tom Fosmire, a friend from SEA Supply who worked with the Border Police in Bangkok. Tom announced that he planned to drive to Hua Hin on vacation. I knew he had a new British sports car, an MG roadster, and I figured he would look enough like a tourist to get through army checkpoints on the way. I assumed his visit represented a station effort to reestablish contact with me, but I didn't know when he would arrive or how much useful information he would have when he did.

Pranet and I decided that we would have to rely on our own devices to prevent an unnecessary conflict with the army. We polled our young officers to see who might have a useful connection in Petchaburi and found that Lieutenant Surayuth, the leader of our Pathfinder Platoon, had a classmate in the infantry unit there. Surayuth had visited often enough to be sure that, even under the current circumstances, he would attract no special attention if, as usual, he traveled in civilian clothes.

Pranet and I sent him off with instructions to try to get an introduction to his friend's battalion commander. We then waited in some suspense until about noon the next day, when Surayuth returned with an account of his reception. His friend had taken him to the battalion commander, a lieutenant colonel named Paitoon Inkanawat, who had invited the two to dinner at the Petchaburi market.

Paitoon deplored the tendency in Thai politics to turn security forces into pawns of individual politicians or military commanders: "We are all servants of the nation." He assured Surayuth that he accepted our freedom from political manipulation and promised to do what he could to prevent a confrontation between us and the army. He would give us all possible advance notice of an army takeover of Camp Narasuan and try to minimize the damage to our operation. He pointed out, however, that the presence of a foreign adviser would not help.

Colonel Paitoon was as good as his word, and we were soon informed that the army was coming to occupy Camp Narasuan. The PARU team watching the road from Petchaburi confirmed that a column of trucks was headed toward us, and Pranet was waiting at the gate when it arrived. The first officer to approach Pranet was not an army officer but a police general named Chart. This was not good news, for he was known to resent our practice of recruiting our men directly from civilian life rather than taking regular police recruits. Sure enough, he began by demanding of Pranet, "Do you surrender?"

"How can I surrender?" Pranet replied, "I am a police officer doing my duty; I have broken no law." Chart fumbled for a reply and finally gave up. Instead, he simply announced that "the army will occupy your camp, and your unit must give up its weapons." By way of authority, he showed Pranet a written order from the coup committee, signed by General Sarit.

The army then entered the camp and collected all our weapons, ammunition, and parachutes—although we had no aircraft of our own, the coup sponsors apparently feared a raid on their headquarters—putting them in our warehouse and installing new locks. After a few days, they loaded everything in trucks and headed toward Bangkok.

Meanwhile, General Chart questioned individual personnel about our activities. He showed special interest in the jungle training camp at Huai Sat Yai, and it was obvious that he suspected us of using it for some kind of secret activity on behalf of General Phao. We smiled, but did not object, when he announced that he was going to lead a team to inspect Huai Sat Yai.

While General Chart set off with a team from Camp Narasuan, Colonel Paitoon stayed behind and worked hard to mend fences. At mealtime, he alternated between eating with us at the camp mess and taking the officers to dinner with him in town. He conveyed an air of sincerity that encouraged us to believe him when he said he thought us one of the best units in Thailand. He had personal ties to Gen. Thanom Kittikachorn, deputy commander of the army and Sarit's first assistant, and he volunteered to intercede with Thanom on our behalf.

While Paitoon was still with us, a very subdued General Chart returned with the men he had taken from camp. He had not wanted to believe how hard it could be to reach a site only a few miles away, but he had finally admitted defeat and given up only about halfway to Huai Sat Yai. He had not necessarily concluded that our purposes there were innocent, however, and he returned to Bangkok without a word about what he would recommend to the coup committee.

The coup had demonstrated the need for direct communications between me and Bangkok Station, and, when Tom Fosmire finally showed up, he brought the necessary material. At Hua Hin, we had trained our radio operators in techniques compatible with the operation of this new link, and Pranet had no objection to my using them to transmit occasional messages. I encrypted these myself before giving them to the operators for transmission to a recipient I did not identify except by call sign.

Still nervous about the unit's future, Pranet and I cast about for allies. The possibilities were few; we had to choose the best of a weak selection. Confined to Hua Hin and deprived of our equipment, we concluded that we would have to do something in the town itself. This "something" was a program of civic action designed to ingratiate us further in a community of which we were already an accepted part.

With no money for material improvements, our efforts could be no more than cosmetic, but we made them as conspicuous as possible. We cleaned the right of way along the main road, swept the streets, pulled weeds in the municipal park, and picked up debris along the beaches. The camp doctor increased his regular contribution of time to the local Red Cross clinic, which had nurses but no physician. We could only hope that word of our program would reach the king. At the very least, we could be confident that existing good relations with the townspeople would prevent us from looking self-serving or manipulative.

In the midst of the uncertainty over our future in mid-December, I got a flash message from Bangkok Station via my new radio link. A US radar site on a remote mountain-top in Loei Province had gone silent, and the embassy feared for the safety of the technicians there.

Recent heavy rains had reduced the roads to impassable mud, and the only access was by air. Could we at Hua Hin find out what was going on?

The last thing we needed at this point was an uncoordinated movement that alarmed the new government. So we did nothing until Pranet advised his superiors of the embassy request and got the okay to visit the radar site. At the same time, I advised the embassy to contact Thai National Police Headquarters in Bangkok and ask that Hua Hin be ordered to parachute a team into the site at Loei

With approvals in hand, we prepared a team with such equipment as the army had left us. This included our own hunting rifles and the new T-10 parachutes that I had been storing in my house outside the camp until I received enough of them to replace the unit's World War II-vintage T-7s.

The station's C-47 picked up our search team, led by Sergeant Somboon. He told me later that the heavy overcast had nearly forced him to abort the mission, but the CAT pilot had waited for a break in the overcast, and the team jumped safely into the radar site. There, they found the embassy's worst fears confirmed: all four Americans and several of the dozen Thai civilians employed at the installation had been robbed and killed.

The perpetrators were long gone, and all Somboon could do was help carry the bodies down the hill to the nearest road for transport back to Bangkok. He and his team then remained to do some preliminary investigating on behalf of the provincial police, hoping to determine who had perpetrated the brutal crime. He concentrated his efforts on the town at the foot of the mountain, assuming that the radar men would have visited it for such relief from boredom as it might offer.

There, Somboon found a seedy bar and brothel that constituted the town's only public entertainment. After interrogating its employees, he concluded that the unfortunate radar men had been set up by the bar girls, who had—innocently, perhaps—told some of their patrons about the site and its staff of wealthy *farang* (Caucasians). Word had then gotten to one of the bandit gangs that infested such border areas. We had at least been able to determine the fate of the staff of the radar site, and I think the good will this generated, especially at the embassy, was a factor in our surviving the military takeover.

Our survival was not yet assured, however. We got no public credit for our work on the case, for both governments were eager to conceal the disaster from the media. The *New York Times* had reported on December 20th that the radar site was under construction and that only one American, a California engineer, had been killed. It said nothing about the Thai or the parachute drop. Meanwhile, the Bangkok press, always hungry for sensation, was feeding Sarit's paranoia about the Airborne Royal Guard with stories about the Black Tigers and their alleged determination to bring down the new government. The term "Black Tigers" referred to us at Camp Narasuan. Pranet had chosen that animal as our mascot and erected a statue of one at the camp gate. One article claimed that "General Billair"—my name, transliterated into Thai, appeared as one word—was at that very moment marching on Bangkok with six thousand Black Tiger paratroopers armed with, yes, atomic hand grenades.

Such fantasies were not at all helpful as we struggled to extricate ourselves from the sticky web of internal politics, and we could only hope that our record would speak for itself. Although Phao was safely in exile, Sarit continued to worry that the Black Tigers would work some magic to effect his return.

On occasion, the press could be helpful. While we waited for a decision, a columnist for one Bangkok paper derided his colleagues' raving about Parachute Police involvement in coup plotting. He emphasized instead the civic action work we were so visibly doing in Hua Hin and complimented us on a display of public spirit rarely seen in a security organization. The importance of the column lay mainly in the well-known connection between its author and the king. Pranet told me that Sarit and the other senior military knew of the link and were accustomed to seeing royal wishes conveyed in this indirect fashion. It already appeared that Sarit was making a greater effort than Pibul had done to foster good relations with the monarchy, and we could thus hope that Sarit would understand and be guided by this message.

In fact, our weapons and chutes suddenly reappeared, carried by the same army trucks that had borne them away. Pranet and I could only speculate on the reasons for the about-face. As we saw it, indirect royal support and the unit's performance at the radar site might have combined to persuade Sarit that it would be impolitic to disband a US-supported organization. Then there was Colonel Paitoon. At the time, we could not determine the sincerity of his promise to intercede with General Thanom. Much later, Paitoon, by then a general, proved to be a good and loyal friend during the conflict in Laos, and in retrospect I am confident that he worked on Thanom exactly as he said he would.

We had survived, but there was one thing about which Sarit, the new prime minister, would have the last say: our unit designation was so closely identified with General Phao that it would have to go. Pranet got word of this through police channels along with instructions to suggest a new name. The main thing, we agreed, was that it be as innocuous as possible. Nothing macho and no suggestion of elitism or royal patronage. Looking for a name that summarized our mission in accurate but bland language, we came up with Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit—PARU. The government accepted the name, and, even in Thai, the unit came to be known by its English acronym.

Another result of Phao's departure was the disappearance of SEA Supply. Sarit thought it too much identified with Phao, and Washington elected not to choose another commercial entity to replace it. Instead, CIA took over direct representation of US interests in PARU, while the Public Safety Division of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) adopted the advisory role with most of the other Thai police organizations.

The Agency connection created two more threats to PARU's longevity, one on the Thai side and the other on the US side. First was the potential problem with Sarit. As long as General Phao ran the police, we could count on Thai support, but now he was gone. I knew that Sarit, although he now tacitly accepted our continued existence, still doubted our loyalty. I also knew that he was not free of the Thai propensity for conspiracy thinking. I therefore worried that he might take my membership in PARU as implying a continued CIA preference for Phao as head of government.

On the CIA side, the uncertainty about PARU's future had its roots in the annual budgetary process, which judged all activities on their short-term accomplishments and prospects. The kind of contingency for which we had created PARU had not yet arisen. In 1957, a deceptive calm prevailed in South Vietnam and the rest of French Indochina, and indigenous Thai communist activity constituted no more than a minor nuisance. In these circumstances, we needed a patron in CIA as much as we did in the Thai government. I was confident we had one at Headquarters in the person of Desmond "Des" FitzGerald, but a change of CIA representation at that time in Bangkok gave cause for alarm.

The new chief was Robert Jantzen, called "Red" because of his red hair and ruddy, freckled complexion. Jantzen had one overriding objective—to establish a close working relationship with the head of government. Although I thought him otherwise rather inept, he certainly achieved his principal purpose. He established such an intimacy with General Sarit that Washington came to regard him as its indispensable man in Bangkok; he remained there for an unprecedented 12 years. Jantzen soon learned of Sarit's mistrust of PARU. He understood perfectly well, of course, that its CIA connection implied no bias whatever toward Phao as a political leader. Nevertheless, his single-minded pursuit of personal rapport with Sarit prevented him from giving us the support we wanted.

I soon discovered that my apprehension about attitudes in Washington was no mere fantasy. After the political dust settled, Chalern and I took the home leave that the coup had forced us to postpone. I had by now learned what had eluded me in 1953: lobbying for one's project at the home office is an indispensable part of getting the job done when one is far from home.

Accordingly, I visited Washington, where I discovered from the branch chief who supervised Southeast Asia that he intended to recommend terminating CIA support to PARU. In his view, the project was simply not making the kind of direct contribution to Agency objectives that would justify even the modest investment now in effect. I accepted his opinion as authoritative—if short-sighted—and, grateful to get some advance notice, went to the personnel office to inquire about overseas jobs elsewhere.

My exploration of the job market came to the attention of Des FitzGerald, who called me into his office. "You're doing a good job in Thailand," he said. "Why do you want a transfer?" "I don't," I replied, "but they're going to terminate the project." Des responded that "they" were going to do no such thing, that I should enjoy my home leave and then return to Hua Hin and take up where I had left off.

That should have ended the matter; a chief of station, after all, works for the chief of the division. Chiefs in the field enjoyed enormous autonomy in those days, however, and, when I got back to Bangkok, I discovered that FitzGerald's support did not translate into backing from Red Jantzen.

The result was that, by late 1957, Pranet and I found ourselves pretty much encircled. Jantzen had proposed to Sarit a new unit composed of both soldiers and PARU troopers. The idea, as he explained it to me, was to preserve PARU operational skills while keeping the unit

under army supervision. Sarit would come to understand and value PARU capabilities when he could be assured that they would not be used against him.

I objected strenuously to the politically motivated creation of such a hybrid, but I was not surprised when I lost the battle. The new organization was duly established at an army installation at Phitsanulok. Pranet and I sent about 100 of our men, about a quarter of the total, and the army provided about 200. The outfit did nothing, of course, for it had no operational purpose. Had it absorbed all of PARU, it would have assuaged Sarit's political paranoia at the price of eviscerating the border intelligence and security program.

Sarit may have thought he was getting rid of us, but the career officials he had charged with setting up the joint unit were sufficiently persuaded of PARU's value to make sure we survived. Thus, the order to provide men for the new organization said nothing one way or the other about PARU as an institution. The result was that, although the men we sent to Phitsanulok could not be easily spared, we retained the bulk of the unit under the control of Hua Hin. We did have to reduce the number of BICs, but our security mission on the remote frontiers continued.

Furthermore, even after the departure of General Phao, the National Police continued to harbor a proprietary feeling about PARU. Like civil servants before them, senior officers at Police Headquarters used the system to mitigate the excesses of an autocratic ruler. In this case, they drafted an order for Sarit that made only temporary assignments to the joint unit; the men would eventually return to their parent unit. Meanwhile, we were allowed to accept replacements in small increments; the only concession we had to make was that we would no longer recruit directly from the civilian population.

PARU and I were not the only pawns in all the political maneuvering that followed Marshal Sarit's accession to power. I got an anguished call one day from Don Ryder, the Public Safety Division officer in charge of aid to the Border Patrol Police (BPP). His Thai counterpart, the chief of the BPP, had just curtly informed him that, if he wanted further contact with the Thai, he would have to go through me in my capacity as a Thai police officer.

The counterpart was Chan Ansuchote, an army general whom Sarit did not much like but had nevertheless transferred to this police command. With PARU now subordinated to the BPP, I had taken care to start cultivating General Chan's goodwill immediately upon his assignment to the police. He had treated me with courtesy and respect, and I was startled to hear that Ryder, a good, straightforward man, was in his doghouse.

As I then found out, Washington had told Ryder that a grant of rifles for BPP troopers had just been approved, and Chan had conveyed this good news to his sometime nemesis Marshal Sarit. Washington then changed its mind, and suddenly no rifles were in the pipeline. Chan had no choice but to tell Sarit, which he did in an agony of embarrassment that he then vented on Don Ryder, the bearer of the bad news. I later managed to patch things up between Chan and Ryder—each was a man of integrity—but for a while I had to handle US logistical aid to the BPP.

This episode did not deceive me into thinking that PARU was out of the woods. Sarit's attitude toward us would depend to some degree on Jantzen's, which I knew to be one of less than wholehearted support. Unable to communicate directly with FitzGerald in Washington, I began, somewhat belatedly, to look for allies on Jantzen's staff.

My unconventional career path had taught me a lot about unconventional warfare and Thailand but very little about maneuvering around a bureaucracy. I had some catching up to do. Fortunately for me, some of Jantzen's subordinates shared my view that PARU and its unique capacity for joint operations with the Thai should be preserved. Dave Whipple, in charge of the intelligence branch, pointed out that a PARU contribution to the station's intelligence product would make the unit easier to defend at the annual budget exercise.

It is doubtless a mark of my bureaucratic naiveté that I had never before thought of intelligence reports as a commodity that could be traded for money. In any case, no one had previously suggested that PARU reporting might have intelligence as well as operational value. I saw Whipple's point, however, and set out to fill the gap.

The practical problem was to contribute useful reports in sufficient quantity to mollify the bean counters in Washington. My savior in this effort came in the person of Connie Ettridge, Jantzen's exceptionally competent reports officer, who supervised the editing and dissemination of all intelligence collected by the station. As another believer in the security mission of PARU, she set out to help me demonstrate its potential as a collection instrument.

Connie looked at the various places to which PARU operations gave us access and designated my targets. Dissident activity along the Burmese border and the rise of the communist-led Pathet Lao in Laos were two subjects to which Pranet and I had devoted a lot of attention, but we had tended to use our information in-house as the basis for contingency planning. Connie pointed out that some of our information could not be obtained anywhere else and deserved to be reported. In addition, Washington's interest in narcotics trafficking was growing and our capability in that area was unique.

Finally, there was my own wide acquaintanceship in the Thai security establishment. Connie acknowledged that my contacts were not recruited agents but officers loyal to the king and that they told me what they thought was in Thailand's interest to share with the US government. Nevertheless, as she had been in Thailand long enough to know, the personal dimension dictated the productivity of professional relationships, and I was perhaps more widely accepted than any other official American in Bangkok. She urged me to keep her apprised of important conversations and offered to write up my material herself.

It became my practice to visit Connie at home whenever I came to Bangkok, bringing the results of BIC reporting and being debriefed by her on the latest political developments. With her generous help, PARU and I fairly quickly began to provide a substantial portion of CIA's reporting from Bangkok. Near the end of 1958, Connie told me we were accounting for one fourth of the total. Jantzen himself began paying me the implied compliment of calling me in whenever he had to write something that required an understanding of Thai politics.

There was little I could do to repay Connie's exceptional work on my behalf until I discovered that she was a serious bird watcher. She and two Thai friends, one a woman and the other a physician who was also the country's leading ornithologist, spent much of their leisure time looking for rare birds. With my numerous contacts in the provinces, I was able to arrange visits to otherwise inaccessible sites. On such trips, Connie and her friends discovered several previously unidentified species, and these small triumphs seemed to make her feel that I had provided a fully adequate quid pro quo.

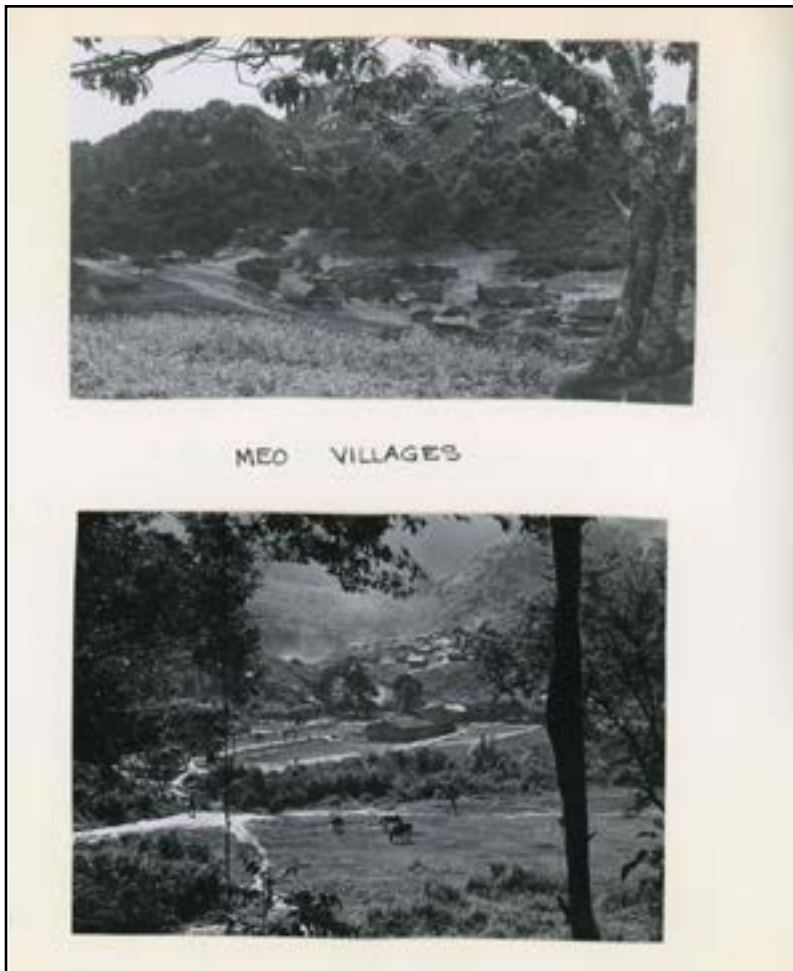
As time passed, the bureaucratic emphasis on quantity made me wonder sometimes how much of our intelligence product served a real need, but this concern diminished when, beginning in 1958, fragile Laos came to the brink of chaos and civil war. There could be no question about the urgency of this issue; it continued to grow until outgoing President Eisenhower told President-elect John Kennedy in early 1961 that the fate of Laos would determine the future of all Southeast Asia.



Chapter 9

Laos in Chaos—PARU's Moment

“I knew that securing a role for PARU would require some careful maneuvering through both CIA and Thai bureaucratic thickets. My first objective would be to deploy a PARU detachment with anti-communist forces in Laos.”



Images from Vint Lawrence scrapbook, "The Mountain People of Northern Laos and Thailand 1962–1966 (Volume-1)" (1964). Scrapbooks. 1. <https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/lawrence-scrapbooks/1>

Laos had always been a PARU intelligence target, but in 1958 we raised its priority, shifting BICs from the Burma border over to the Mekong. We set one up at Chiang Kong, near the northern limit of Thai-Lao border. For the first time, we established centers along the Mekong Plain down as far as Mukdahan, a river town in Northeast Thailand across from Savannakhet at the mid-point of the Laotian panhandle.

Pranet and I visited the new sites almost monthly, debriefing the teams and ensuring that they covered the political loyalties of the Laotian hill tribes in their intelligence reporting. We traveled with the teams to villages in their operating areas, going by boat where the border followed the Mekong. Elsewhere, we used everything from bus to oxcart—or we walked.

BIC reporting supplemented our personal conversations with villagers, and by these means we soon began to hear about a mountain tribe then known as the Meo and now called the Hmong. Concentrated primarily in Xieng Khouang and Xam Neua Provinces of northern Laos, but with substantial numbers in North Vietnam and Northern Thailand, the group had supplied the agent we used in our first operation against the opium smugglers near Chiang Mai. We had had subsequent contact with Hmong living in Thailand, and I once tried—unsuccessfully—to get our parent unit, the Border Police, to form a constabulary using Hmong and other hill tribesmen.

Our sources on Laos were low level, to be sure—we were not running classic espionage agents—but the sheer volume of interviews conducted by the BICs produced something like a consensus on some key points. A Thai from the northeast who had crossed the Mekong to join the Lao army (known by its French name, *Forces Armées Royaume*, or FAR) was one of the first to mention an officer named Vang Pao, a captain who was then the most senior Hmong in FAR. Another individual who figured prominently in reporting on Hmong tribal politics was Touby Lyfoung, who had succeeded in assimilating to a much greater degree than Vang Pao into the lowland Lao culture. Business interests and political activity absorbed Touby's attention, but he served also as something of a spokesman for the Hmong in Lao government councils.

In 1958 and 1959, Pranet and I had no need to make any binding decisions, but we came to the tentative conclusion—confirmed by the passage of time—that the urbanized Touby was a less attractive candidate than Vang Pao as a potential leader for the tribal resistance to the Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese sponsors.



The obvious vulnerability of Laos had led me to acquaint myself with its history. As a nation, the kingdom actually had very little past; rather, it was a late-19th century creation of the colonial French, who had cobbled it together from even smaller fiefdoms in the Mekong River valley between Thailand on the west and Vietnam on the east. World War II had

weakened the French hold on Indochina—Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—and the communist Viet Minh began their nine-year struggle to expel the colonial regime. This so-called First Indochina War ended in 1954 with the climactic battle of Dien Bien Phu.

At that point, French and Vietnamese auxiliary forces still controlled the southern half of Vietnam, and the Geneva Accords of that year established a provisional line of demarcation at the 17th parallel of latitude. The country was supposed to be united after national elections proposed for 1956.

Washington and the anti-communist government of Ngo Dinh Diem in Saigon feared both the anti-colonialist charisma of Viet Minh leader Ho Chi Minh and the communists' ability to manipulate the electoral process. They therefore repudiated the Geneva provision for elections, and the Viet Minh and President Diem's government began their mortal struggle for control of Vietnam and influence over Vietnam's weaker neighbors.

The fate of tiny, feeble Laos depended primarily on the outcome of the contest between North and South Vietnam. Thailand had over the years made periodic thrusts into Laos, especially into areas west of the Mekong, but Vietnamese ambition remained the perennial Lao anxiety. After the Geneva Accords, this ambition was reflected in de facto control of the two northernmost Laotian provinces, Xam Neua and Phôngsali, by the Hanoi-supported Pathet Lao.

As in neighboring South Vietnam, the anti-communist government in Laos was crippled both by its feudal structure and by its identification with the colonial system. The royal government, staffed by a French-oriented elite that enjoyed little popular support, rapidly saw its position decay. During a brief period of unified government, the Pathet Lao made steady gains until 1958, when they won 13 of 21 newly-created seats in the legislature. A year later, we watched from across the Mekong River as, after failed efforts to integrate Pathet Lao forces into the national army, the Vientiane government arrested all Pathet Lao legislators it could get its hands on.

In 1960, elections conspicuously rigged by the government nullified previous Pathet Lao gains. The imprisoned Pathet Lao legislators then escaped into the bush, and, on August 9, one of the Lao army's few effective combat leaders, Captain Kong Le, mutinied against the new, militantly anti-communist government.

On that day, I happened to be flying in the station's C-47, making supply drops to the BICs along the Thai-Burma Border. As usual, the Chinese radio operator let me occupy his seat so I could listen to the Voice of America. On this occasion, I was only half-listening, when suddenly the VOA announcer jolted me with the news of the coup. Kong Le had arrested most of the cabinet members as they returned from a conference with King Savang Vatthana at the royal capital of Louangphabang in the north.

Phoumi Nosavan had escaped and had flown directly to Savannakhet in the Laotian panhandle, and he now had de facto control of southern Laos. As I listened over the drone of the C-47's engines, I recognized with a rush of adrenaline that PARU's time had come. Kong Le controlled only the Vientiane plain. Northern Laos, except for the two Pathet-Lao controlled provinces, constituted something of a political and military no-man's-land.

Power abhors a vacuum, of course, and I had no doubt that, unless the United States acted quickly and decisively, Kong Le's neutralists would allow—if not connive in—the expansion of communist domination in the north. Only a hill-tribe resistance based on the Hmong could prevent that, and PARU was ideally suited to organize and guide such a movement.

I knew that securing a role for PARU would require some careful maneuvering through both CIA and Thai bureaucratic thickets. My first objective would be to deploy a PARU detachment with anti-communist forces in Laos. There being no time like the present, I told the pilot to radio a change in the flight plan. I wrote notes, one to Pranet and one to my wife, saying that I could not predict when I would be home. For Pranet, I added the gist of the VOA report and advised him to get our men ready.

Bob Jantzen greeted me more warmly than usual, for he recognized in PARU the only CIA resource that might help deal with crisis in Laos. His urgent interest in the matter reflected that of Prime Minister Sarit, whom he described as “all worked up” over the Kong Le coup. Phoumi Nosavan, the rightist general now in Savannakhet, was a cousin of Sarit, and Sarit was worried both about the political fate of Laos and about the welfare of his relative across the Mekong. The first imperative of Thai foreign policy had always been to prevent conflict or instability in neighboring countries from spreading to Thai territory. If either the communist Pathet Lao or Kong Le's neutralists should take over all of Laos, Northeast Thailand would be directly threatened.

Jantzen showed me cable traffic that brought me up to date on developments in Laos. He was no less worked up than Sarit about the situation and heatedly criticized the embassy and CIA in Vientiane for not proposing a more vigorous reaction. He showed me messages from Jack Hasey, the Vientiane officer in liaison with Phoumi, and it was clear that Hasey and Jantzen were of one mind on the need for a decisive move against Kong Le. By contrast, Ambassador Winthrop G. Brown in Vientiane, loyally supported by CIA chief Gordon Jorgensen, feared that further polarization of Laotian politics would ultimately work to the communists' advantage. Sarit, meanwhile, desperately wanted to ensure that Phoumi and the conservative faction prevailed, but he hesitated to commit the Royal Thai army to their aid.

I pointed out to Jantzen that PARU could move into Laos any time, using natives of Northeastern Thailand who could pass for Laotian even if captured by the enemy. Our reporting had long since revealed that many Thai served in the Laotian army. Jantzen acknowledged that PARU was better prepared than the army for a mission in Laos and encouraged me to continue preparing teams for eventual deployment there.

Jantzen's activism did not prevail, at least for the moment. With the consent of the king and the National Assembly, Kong Le re-installed Prince Souvanna Phouma as prime minister. Lao politics had deteriorated into a factional triangle, and most of the principal players who would dominate Lao national politics until the cease-fire of 1973 had emerged. The exception was Hmong leader Vang Pao.

On the left were the Pathet Lao and their charismatic leader, Prince Souphanouvong, half-brother of the neutralist Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma. As with the Viet Minh before 1954, a national leadership dominated by avowed communists controlled a largely nationalist

but non-communist membership concerned primarily with issues of social and economic justice. Unlike the Viet Minh, who took orders from no one, whether in Beijing or in Moscow, the Pathet Lao accepted their subordination to Hanoi.

On the right stood Phoumi Nosavan and other like-minded military officers, supported by prominent families in Vientiane and by Prince Boun Oum, the dominant political figure in South Laos and principal member of the traditional Kingdom of Champassak. They had no common political or economic program and were united almost solely by their antipathy for Souvanna Phouma and the Pathet Lao.

Kong Le and Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma occupied the uncomfortable middle. Souvanna wanted desperately, if naively, to resist the polarization of Lao politics into pro-Hanoi and pro-Washington factions. Kong Le—certainly not a communist sympathizer—seems to have sought, perhaps equally naively, an end to army corruption and incompetence. The coup he launched on August 9 only diminished the prospects for military reforms, however, instead provoking the Eisenhower administration to begin looking for ways to counter the rise of what it saw as a fatally dangerous trend toward neutralism in Laos. Washington's efforts intensified after the new Laotian government established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in October.

From a strictly legal standpoint, Phoumi was now as much a mutineer as Kong Le had been in August, for the king had endorsed the government that followed the coup; indeed, Phoumi had initially agreed to join it as deputy prime minister. To most US policymakers, however, the communist threat overrode any question about the technical propriety of US support to a faction in rebellion against the Royal Lao government. In Vientiane, Ambassador Brown gradually lost ground to those who spoke of a domino effect and predicted that the loss of Laos would lead to a communist victory in the rest of Southeast Asia.

From my point of view, the prospect of support to Phoumi created both an opportunity and a problem. The opportunity arose from the obvious need for an advisory element surreptitiously attached to Phoumi's troops on their proposed march northward. Two of his battalions had recently been routed by much smaller Kong Le forces, and further such disasters had to be avoided. PARU lacked experience in large-unit operations, but our men were highly trained in counter guerrilla operations and had good, secure communications. I saw an advisory mission to Phoumi as our best and perhaps only chance to win a role in what would clearly be a protracted struggle with the Pathet Lao, whatever the outcome of the planned rightist drive on Vientiane from Savannakhet.

The problem arose from Sarit's abiding distrust of PARU, which dated back to the unit's creation under the auspices of General Phao. His skepticism had to be overcome if he was to be prevented from entrusting the mission to the Thai army, which I knew had done little or nothing to prepare itself. Bob Jantzen's deference to Sarit meant that I could not rely on him to promote a role for PARU. Pranet had a similar dilemma on the Thai side, for his superiors were not eager to create the appearance of police meddling in military affairs.

If Sarit shrank from using PARU in Laos, however, he was determined to do something to help his kinsman, General Phoumi. Vientiane's continued temporizing on a decision

to support Phoumi drove Jantzen frantic. On one occasion, he crumpled one of Gordon Jorgensen's cautionary messages, flung it to the floor, and jumped up and down on it. The effect was comical, not to say undignified, but I had too much at stake to allow my amusement to show.

I did the only thing I could do, which was to hang around the station and make sure I saw everything in the flood of message traffic while waiting for a break.



Chapter 10

The Birth of the Hmong Resistance

“It was a big day for Pranet and me, the culmination of seven years of preparation for a low-profile program of irregular warfare against communism in Southeast Asia. When I flew back in a Helio the next day, training was already under way, and I had nothing to do but watch.”



Vang Pao in an undated photo. We doubted the ability of the Lao army to hold even the Vientiane Plain against the combined neutralist and communist forces. I suggested that Major Vang Pao might offer access to the fighting potential of the Hmong tribesmen. He would lead the Hmong through the entire conflict and eventually settle in the United States with fellow Hmong emigrés. Photo © AlamyStock.com

Washington still leaned toward supporting Phoumi, and the Americans in Savannakhet continued to discuss with him the terms of US help for a march on Vientiane. The break came when Phoumi pointed out to his CIA contact, Jack Hasey, that his troops could not be expected to fight unless they were paid. His rebellion had cut him off from Defense Ministry funds, and pay and allowances were already in arrears. Very much one of the general's partisans, Hasey urged that the United States give Phoumi some of the Lao currency—the kip—then in US safekeeping in Bangkok. The money technically belonged to the Lao government under the military aid program, but, in October, after much hesitation, Washington ordered part of it used for an emergency transfer to Phoumi.

CIA was to serve as middleman in the transaction, and, seeing a chance to get PARU's nose under the tent, I volunteered to be the payroll courier. Jantzen knew perfectly well what I had in mind but did not object. He told me to meet the plane at Don Muang Airport; two of his support people would bring the cash. Despite having been told what to look for, I had trouble finding the tiny craft, lost on the vast expanse of tarmac. Sporting a high rectangular wing and outsized tail surfaces and squatting on an archaic tail wheel, the Helio Courier—a short takeoff and landing (STOL) airplane that everyone called simply the Helio—looked too clumsy to fly.

Ron Sutphin, Air America's chief Helio pilot, showed me the features that were to make this aircraft the mainstay of our communications and local supply networks during the first years of the conflict in Laos. At low airspeed, the movable slat at the leading edge of the wing slid forward—with a rather disquieting thud—increasing lift so much that the plane could take off and land at a mere 35 miles an hour. Even at the high elevations of mountain airstrips, the Helio could make do with a runway no longer than a football field, and this allowed the Hmong to carve adequate strips into short, sharply crested ridge lines.

When the money for the Savannakhet forces arrived, packed in large cardboard boxes, I wondered if it would fit. The two rear seats of this four-place machine had been removed to accommodate cargo. Several hundred thousand dollars in small denominations took up a lot of space even at the official rate of thirty-five to one dollar—and the kip's market value was not even a fourth of that. Sutphin, as I learned, never concerned himself about his captain's privileges, and he helped me cram it all in. We climbed into the front seats, and he radioed the tower for takeoff instructions.

Heading northeast toward the Khorat Plateau, we encountered heavy cloud cover. Sutphin climbed to bring us up through the overcast and, once back in the sunshine, proceeded to tell me more about his plane. "It'll do everything but make biscuits," he asserted. I later learned that, with a pilot like him at the controls, this was close to the truth. At this point, however, I didn't know either the pilot or his aircraft, so I asked what would happen if the engine quit. By way of reply, Ron reached up and switched off the ignition. In the sudden silence, he pointed

out that our forward speed and rate of descent were so low that, if we couldn't find a field on which to put down, we could survive a crash landing right in the treetops. I wanted to believe him, not put him to the test, and by now we were sinking through unbroken overcast. I said I was convinced and suggested he get the engine running again and climb out of the soup.

We descended through the cloud cover again after crossing the Khorat Plateau. When we saw the ground, we were approaching Mukdahan on the Thai side of the Mekong across from Savannakhet. We skimmed the Mekong and landed on a soccer field next to the headquarters buildings of the 3rd Military Region of the Laotian army.

As we parked, a man approached. Sutphin introduced him to me as Phoumi adviser Jack Hasey. I noticed that Jack spoke in a half whisper. I later learned that this was the result of a throat wound he had suffered during heroic service with the French Foreign Legion early in World War II. Jack had befriended General Phoumi while both were students at a French military staff school, and that accounted for his assignment in Savannakhet.

Jack took me in to Phoumi's French colonial office with its 11-foot ceiling and lazy ceiling fan. As I had foreseen, my coming with money for the troops pretty well guaranteed a cordial reception. The general described his military situation and listened attentively as I explained, in Thai, how I thought I could help. I said that I had been in Thailand for almost 10 years and that I had helped organize and train a police parachute unit to operate in conditions like those facing Phoumi in Laos.

Phoumi said he intended to launch five battalions north. He wanted them to reach Vientiane before Soviet aid to Kong Le complicated the task of retaking the city without excessive military and civilian casualties. I suggested deploying five-man PARU teams, each with a radioman and a medic, with each battalion. Our secure communications would keep his units in touch with the Thai, who were eager to help.

Phoumi looked interested but skeptical about our ability to act quickly enough. "How long will it take you to get your men into Laos?" he demanded. I replied that I could have five teams in Savannakhet the day after getting the order to move. He looked pleasantly surprised at the prospect of such speedy action. We left it at that, and Sutphin and I went off to lunch while Jack Hasey stayed behind for more discussion with the general.

I made it explicit that my superiors, both Thai and American, would make any decision to commit PARU to Laos but that I anticipated approval if Phoumi asked for this help. I thought he looked taken with the idea—he could but benefit from a concrete gesture of Thai-American support—and Hasey confirmed this impression when he rejoined us. Although it was in fact several more weeks before Phoumi himself was ready, I think my assurance of PARU readiness helped our cause when the Thai army made its move to preempt the advisory role.

It was dark by the time we reached Don Muang, and I had to wait until morning to see Jantzen. He was eager for a report on my meeting with Phoumi and Hasey, for he was about to see Prime Minister Sarit. I quickly gave the COS the highlights, emphasizing Phoumi's expression of interest in the assignment of PARU teams to his forces when they marched on Vientiane.

At their meeting, Sarit responded in noncommittal fashion to Jantzen's mention of PARU, saying that he wanted to see me and Pranet. He sent a radio summons to Pranet, who then sent me his itinerary over the Border Police radio. We arrived at Sarit's office early enough for me to brief him about Phoumi's reception of my suggestion about PARU. We agreed that it looked like the opportunity we'd been waiting for, but it remained to be seen how Sarit and the army would react.

We were joined in Sarit's office by the chief of staff of the Royal Thai army and a phalanx of senior officers. Sarit opened by saying that he wanted to help Phoumi and the anti-communist cause in Laos but that he hesitated to deploy army personnel across the Mekong. He also hesitated to deprive the army of any voice in the Thai response to the crisis, so he concluded by instructing four of the army officers present to accompany me and Pranet back to Savannakhet for another session with Phoumi. Only with the results of those discussions in hand would Sarit decide what to do.

Sarit dismissed Pranet and me—Jantzen had not been invited—but the military people stayed. Pranet and I worried that they would play on Sarit's well-known distrust of the police, and PARU in particular, to shoot down any further consideration of us as the Thai government's instrument in Laos. When Jantzen talked to Sarit, however, the prime minister confirmed the instructions he had given at the meeting. Pranet radioed Hua Hin with instructions to put five teams and an extra radio team on one-hour alert. The following morning, we boarded the Air America C-47 with the four Thai army officers and proceeded directly to Savannakhet.

We arrived at about noon, and General Phoumi invited us to lunch; neither he nor I alluded to our earlier meeting. Colonel Chamnian, the senior Royal Thai army officer with us, confirmed Sarit's desire to support Phoumi and asked what the Lao needed. I was gratified to hear Phoumi echo my suggestion that he be given a small support team attached to each of the five battalions he had already dispatched up Route 13 to recapture Vientiane.

Chamnian's response was much less gratifying; it suggested that Pranet's and my fears of being elbowed aside by the military were far from a paranoid fantasy. Sarit would supply the teams, Chamnian said, but the prime minister preferred to send Thai army personnel rather than PARU. Phoumi asked exactly the question I hoped he'd ask: "How long will it take to get these teams to Savannakhet?" Chamnian pondered a while and said about 30 days.

Phoumi rejected that out of hand; his men were bogged down at Pakxan, east of Vientiane. If the city were not taken immediately, he said, it would be too late. He turned to Pranet and asked about lead time for the movement of PARU teams. Pranet replied that he had a team in Mukdahan that could radio Hua Hin with orders to prepare the teams and call for an aircraft. His men could be in Savannakhet by noon the next day.

Unlike some of his army colleagues, Chamnian had never been a PARU antagonist. Sarit wanted action, so he bowed to Phoumi's impatience and agreed to the substitution. The PARU doctrine of preparation for contingencies had paid off, but Pranet and I carefully concealed our feeling of triumph. Instead, we made our farewells, and Pranet left to find a boat for the crossing to Mukdahan. Meanwhile, I took charge of the large house that Phoumi had given us

for our radio base station and lodging for the PARU contingent. The Thai army, still technically the senior partner on the Thai side, christened our base Headquarters 333, a designation we kept until the end of the war despite moving first to Vientiane and then back into Thailand.

I say the Thai army was only “technically” the senior partner because PARU, then and later, controlled the communications. Lt. Amneuy Pradub, one of the original Lop Buri cadre, was now PARU communications chief, and he came the next day, along with the five operational teams, to set up our base station.

After briefing the teams, we dispatched them up Route 13, an unpaved road along the Mekong from Savannakhet to Vientiane. Once they joined their respective battalions, they would provide such advice as the Lao needed and would accept. To assure their status with the Lao, we introduced team leaders as officers, even though most were sergeants.

More important than advice, at this point, was communications. The teams would keep Savannakhet apprised of progress and problems and allow us to coordinate material support from the Thai side of the Mekong. The Lao army, equipped only with obsolete US army field radios and still using the French language, had an unreliable and insecure communications network. The Lao commander at Pakxan soon learned to appreciate the superiority of PARU radio, and the leader of the team there became the channel for messages between him and Phoumi’s headquarters at Savannakhet.

Phoumi feared that Kong Le was about to invite Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces to help him hold the Vientiane Plain. His commander at Pakxan refused to budge, however, saying that he was under fire and could not cross the Sane River without artillery support. Colonel Chamnian arranged for a 105mm howitzer to be brought up to the Thai side of the Mekong, opposite Pakxan, and it opened fire on Kong Le’s positions.

The neutralist forces were just as allergic as Phoumi’s men to being brought under fire, and they pulled out of Pakxan, heading toward Vientiane. General Phoumi’s battalions crossed the Sane River but pursued the enemy in such dilatory fashion that Colonel Chamnian began to fear Kong Le would be allowed to consolidate his position in Vientiane. Chamnian persuaded Phoumi to recall two battalions from the front and let the Thai ferry them across the Mekong and truck them to a point opposite Vientiane. Having learned at Pakxan how much the Lao depended on artillery, the Thai brought up two 105mm howitzers. Bangkok wanted no more firing from Thai territory, however, so Chamnian moved them by barge to an island in the Mekong that belonged to Laos. There, manned by Lao army gun crews, they opened fire on Vientiane. I think the Thai army added artillery fire from its side of the Mekong, but, if so and if anyone inquired, it was attributed to the Lao gunners on the island.

The ploy worked. When Kong Le’s headquarters began taking fire, he withdrew northward along Route 13, which could take him either to the royal capital at Louangphabang or to the strategically important Plain of Jars in the mountains of Xieng Khouang Province.^a Phoumi’s forces, our PARU teams still with them, entered Vientiane on December 13 and chased the last Kong Le remnants out of town three days later.

a. The name Plain of Jars, or Plaine des Jarres, alludes to the prehistoric stone jars, some of them five feet high, scattered across the plain and adjacent plateau areas.

With Wat Tay Airport again open to us, everyone at Headquarters 333 flew up with the general in a Laotian Air Force C-47. Indiscriminate heavy weapons firing had caused substantial civilian casualties, however, and, as we drove into the city, we found it almost deserted. We observed that the US embassy had also come under fire, although probably inadvertently, for Kong Le's forces had fled without any organized violence against Americans.

Whatever its intended target, a recoilless rifle shell had shattered Gordon Jorgensen's office minutes after he left it for a meeting with the ambassador. Space was tight in the small Vientiane Station, however, so the COS and I had our first conversation with him seated behind a badly scarred desk and me in a chair next to a gaping hole in the masonry wall.

I went into the meeting with some trepidation. On the one hand, PARU reporting during this episode had proved to be timely and accurate. Sarit and Jantzen were happy, and that meant that, at least for the moment, PARU remained the chosen instrument of the joint Thai-US effort to prevent Laos from falling to the communist Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese.

On the other hand, I was sure that Jorgensen associated me with Bob Jantzen's zeal to support Phoumi's military move against Kong Le. Whatever the COS's personal views, he had backed Ambassador Brown's calls for a last-ditch effort to patch together a coalition government under the neutralist Souvanna Phouma. Accordingly, I wondered if Jorgensen might not see me more as an adversary than as a potential asset.

I need not have worried. The antagonism between Bangkok and Vientiane clearly had a personal element in it on Jantzen's side, but Jorgensen—whatever his private feelings about Jantzen's intrusion on his turf—kept their differences on a professional level. In any case, he was far more disposed to act than was the ambassador, and he was clearly looking for ways to halt the drift toward communist control of Laos. He first asked about my personal welfare, and, when I told him about the rooms in the ratty hotel the Thai had rented downtown, he offered a station-leased house near the airport for me and the entire Thai team.

Jorgy—as he was known to all in the US Mission—invited me to dinner that first evening. He said generous things about the PARU contribution during the march on Vientiane—Bangkok had relayed to him our message traffic—but moved quickly to the question of what to do next.

It was obvious to both of us that the Royal Lao Government had been all but expelled from the northeastern provinces of Xam Neua and Xieng Khouang. We also discovered that both of us doubted the ability of the Lao army to hold even the Vientiane Plain against the combined neutralist and communist forces. I suggested that Major Vang Pao might offer access to the fighting potential of the Hmong tribesmen, and Jorgy readily agreed.

Jorgy already knew of Vang Pao, and, shortly after the Kong Le coup, he had brokered the distribution of 2,000 carbines to some of Vang Pao's Hmong tribesmen in Xieng Khouang Province. The carbines had come from the military aid program, housed with the economic assistance office and known as the Program Evaluation Office (PEO). No one had followed up,

because, for some reason, the field radio the station gave Vang Pao had never been put into service. Thus, with northern Laos still up for grabs, the station was unable to find him.

I told Jorgy that a PARU team had accompanied one of Phoumi's battalions north from Vientiane and was now bivouacked at Ban (the Lao word for village) Ta Viang, a village in the foothills south of the Plain of Jars. Jorgy endorsed an attempt by the team to find Vang Pao, so I drove back to our rundown hotel and Pranet and I wrote a message to the Ta Viang team alerting it to our interest in Vang Pao.

The dinner with Jorgy began the most satisfying professional relationship of my CIA career. Despite the cordiality of his greeting, I had arrived at his house still uncertain of his attitude toward me. He might reasonably have regarded me as Jantzen's man, charged with carrying out Bangkok's agenda with or without his assent.

Much to my relief, I did not feature as the evening's main course. It was not only that we had an immediate meeting of the minds on how to try to save Laos. Even more important to our rapport was Jorgy's totally selfless integrity. Nothing he ever said or did carried the slightest hint that he was trimming his sails to protect his own position. Although he demanded a lot of his subordinates—I don't think he could imagine their being any less devoted than he to the task at hand—he treated them and their ideas with unfailing respect. You could always get a hearing, even if you didn't always win.

PARU success with Phoumi's troops and Jorgy's reception gave Pranet and me an almost euphoric sense of both fulfillment and anticipation. This emotion was reinforced by praise from Colonel Chamnian, who generously told us that no RTA unit could have succeeded as well as PARU had done on the march to Vientiane. He gave full credit to our NCO team leaders, who had established collegial relationships with Phoumi's battalion commanders and managed simultaneously to influence them with constructive advice.

Pranet and I understood that nothing was guaranteed—we hadn't yet found Vang Pao—but I felt that everything had finally come together. My years of learning to lead by suggestion and example had helped produce a Thai organization, PARU, ideally suited to serve both the United States and Thailand in the struggle to prevent communist expansion in Indochina. I was certain that it could help the Lao preserve their political and geographical integrity in a way that would keep the US role almost invisible.



The US decision to back Phoumi was countered by Soviet intervention on behalf of the "neutralist" forces of Kong Le, so the line had been drawn. Laos was now a battlefield in the Cold War. That Cold War threatened to become a hot war, as Khrushchev was only days away from making his notoriously bellicose speech about Soviet support for "wars of national liberation." Unless US troops were to come in to save Laos, we would have to find indigenous allies to compensate for the weakness of the Laotian army.

The Hmong had a reputation for combativeness and a relatively well developed clan organization. They looked like the heart of any guerrilla program, and that is what they became. Other peoples also inhabited the rugged mountains of northern Laos, however, and some of

them, like the Hmong, were descendants of migrants from southern China. These included the Yao and the various tribes of the so-called Phou (mountain) Thai, the latter having no link to present-day Thailand despite their name. These people built their villages at elevations over 3,500 feet, above the range of the malaria mosquito. Still other tribes sprang from the Mon-Khmer stock of the Indochinese peninsula. These included the Lao Theung, who inhabited the lower slopes and were disdained by highland tribes like the Hmong and the Phou Thai.

All of these peoples distrusted and feared the dominant lowland Lao, who in turn regarded them with a mixture of apprehension and contempt. The same ethnic animosity prevailed in the other countries of the region, including Vietnam, which had allowed the French to recruit tribesmen to fight the Viet Minh. Such alliances were, I think, encouraged by the fact that both colonizers and hill peoples were foreigners in the minds of the lowland majority.

It was clear to all of us—certainly to Pranet, Jorgensen, and me—that the hapless Laotian army needed the help of these mountain people. The Lao officer corps embodied the fatalism and passivity of a people wearily conscious of their historical inability to resist the depredations of their stronger neighbors. Few Royal army units were a match even for the Pathet Lao, which had the advantage of a populist propaganda line. Against the vastly superior communist North Vietnamese, the FAR was almost helpless.

The passivity of the dominant ethnic Lao offered one advantage in the circumstances of December 1960: the Lao had never imitated the Vietnamese policy of forced assimilation or violent repression of mountain peoples and had, in fact, integrated a few tribesmen into the governing establishment. Pranet and I wanted to exploit this by getting Lao government endorsement, even if only tacit, for the mobilization of a guerrilla army in the mountains.

At this point, we had not told the Thai army, or even Sarit, about our intentions with respect to the Hmong. We thought it essential, assuming that Vang Pao wanted our help, that he be the one to tackle the subject with the Vientiane government. The Lao remembered the colonial French encouragement of de facto ethnic separatism, and an initiative from either the Thai or the Americans would be deeply suspect. Indeed, as we soon found out, Vang Pao's assurances of loyalty to the king would themselves not be taken at face value. Nevertheless, if we wanted Phoumi on board, Vang Pao would have to persuade him.

Vang Pao's leverage stemmed from his status as both tribal leader and senior Hmong military officer in the tribe that constituted the only potential indigenous force capable of resisting communist absorption of all of Xam Neua and Xieng Khouang Provinces. The Laotian army had for all practical purposes been expelled from both, and, unless Phoumi and the king were prepared simply to abandon them, they had no alternative but to welcome the creation of a Hmong resistance.

Pranet and I knew enough about the Hmong and the other hill tribes not to expect to find a unified, quasi-governmental hierarchy in any one of them. Nevertheless, the informal political structure of the Hmong, essentially a patchwork of clan alliances, gave them more unity than any of the other mountain peoples had achieved. True, there was no single, unchallenged Hmong leader, but, as of late 1960, we saw Touby Lyfoung as Vang Pao's only possible rival

to lead a guerrilla force. Each had his personal and clan followings, and each had cultivated alliances with other clan leaders outside his home area.

The ideal arrangement might have been one that created a relationship in which Vang Pao contributed tactical leadership while Touby, as nominal commander, served Hmong political interests in Vientiane. We knew better than to try brokering such an arrangement, however. Although Vang Pao acknowledged Touby's political influence, the two were of different clans, and Vang Pao could not be expected to abdicate his status as a tribal leader in his own right.

As our earlier reports had led us to expect, the choice was not difficult. Although better known to both Hmong villagers and the Lao establishment, Touby Lyfoung had become a lowland politician and businessman. He maintained an extensive network of tribal contacts but seldom left Vientiane. Middle-aged and overweight, he probably could not have handled the rigors of a guerrilla command even had he really wanted to.

That left Major Vang Pao, commander of the Xieng Khouang Military District. Then 31 years old, he had been a soldier since he was 14 and had become a sergeant in the French colonial army. Now, as commander of the Xieng Khouang district, he controlled the militia units—mostly, but not entirely, composed of Hmong villagers—scattered across the mountains, some of them newly armed with the 2,000 US carbines. Regrettably, no one in Vientiane had made a detailed study of the extent of Vang Pao's influence or that of other leaders in the mountains of the north. As of December 1960, CIA had not considered creating a guerrilla force built on the remnants of the mountain irregulars mobilized by the French against the Viet Minh.

In the first weeks after the capture of Vientiane, I haunted the station and the military side of Wat Tay Airport, two places I was likely to find people with fresh information on tactical developments in the north. Convinced that Vang Pao constituted our only solid prospect as a potential resistance leader, I searched for someone who could tell me of his whereabouts.

Communications with friendly Lao elements in the north were spotty at best, and the station and the defense attaché were concentrating their attention on communist and Kong Le pressure on the Plain of Jars. Vang Pao should be somewhere in the hills there, leading the militiamen to whom PEO had given the weapons in late 1960. The only other CIA man who might help was stationed in Louangphabang, northwest of the Plain of Jars. Stuart Methven had helped arrange the transfer of the 2,000 carbines and at Jorgensen's request was now also looking for Vang Pao on my behalf.

My anxiety increased when, on 1 January 1961, Captain Kong Le and his dissident forces entered the Plain of Jars. Vang Pao might be trapped between Kong Le's neutralists and the communist forces that had just routed the Laotian army units dispatched northward up Route 13 after Phoumi's capture of Vientiane. Chert Chamrat, one of PARU's best platoon leaders, was leading the PARU team attached to the government forces. He reported a night assault on government positions by an enemy using human wave tactics. The Pathet Lao never operated this way, and Chert was certain that the North Vietnamese army had launched the attack.

We continued to look for Vang Pao but heard only vague rumors: Vang Pao had been captured or killed or was leading a retreat from exposed positions near the North Vietnamese

border. By the second week of January, Pranet and I had almost despaired of finding him alive. Nevertheless, we continued to haunt the operations shack at Wat Tay, talking to air crews who might know something about the tactical situation in the Plain of Jars area. Then, early one afternoon, the high-pitched whine of a Helio engine brought my gaze to the sky over the runway, where Ron Sutphin was making an approach for a landing. He had been flying for Methven out of Louangphabang, and I was startled to see him.

The plane rolled up, almost to the door of the operations shack, and came to a stop. Out of it poured so many passengers that they resembled the circus act in which innumerable small clowns emerge from a compact car. Although they were indeed tiny, they were not circus figures but mothers and children, the women dressed in embroidered black and adorned with heavy silver necklaces.

I recognized the Hmong clothing and ran to Sutphin, who told me that his passengers were some of Vang Pao's wives and children. The Hmong officer had finally gotten through to Methven with word that he and his family had reached the relative safety of a government bivouac at Ta Viang, southwest of the Plain of Jars. Vang Pao had wanted his dependents evacuated so he could devote himself to the tactical situation.

I debriefed Sutphin closely on what he'd found at Ta Viang. Vang Pao was there with 25 or 30 men, he said, and did not expect an immediate attack. Vang Pao's men had created an adequate Helio strip by knocking down the dikes between several adjacent paddy fields. Ron had set up a safety signal for subsequent landings there.

If we were to redress the military balance around the Plain of Jars, time was of the essence, but aircraft were in critically short supply. Sutphin had headed back to Louangphabang after refueling, and no other Helios were operating that day. Four new helicopters were standing idle on the tarmac, however, their pilots just standing around. They were Sikorsky H-34s, the kind used by the US Marines, and one of the pilots told me he and the others had just flown in from an aircraft carrier in the Gulf of Thailand.

I dashed to Jorgy's office. The H-34, I told him, would accommodate a PARU team plus Pranet and me. We were ready to go, and so were the aircraft. Jorgy was as eager as I to assess Vang Pao's potential, and he promptly authorized me to go. I was not to run the risk of capture, however. "You are absolutely not to stay overnight." This complicated matters. When I got back to Wat Tay, it was already mid-afternoon. Pranet was there with a PARU team that he had recalled from service with one of Phoumi's battalions. All of its men wore battle dress and carried weapons, radio gear, and rations.

We met our pilot, a nervous young Marine who had been "sheep-dipped" (that is, given fictitious civilian documentation) and sent to Laos ostensibly as an Air America employee. The young man had not yet been briefed by the Air America operations center. He had no maps, no area knowledge, and no enthusiasm for a mission into the unknown just hours after his arrival.

It seemed prudent to conceal my own inexperience on this terrain, so I had done a thorough map study. I pulled out my aeronautical chart and showed him how we could make it

easy. Instead of flying directly northeast over ridgelines folding confusingly one into the next, we would follow the Mekong east to Pakxan then pick up the Sane River and head north to the first substantial village, Ta Viang. Having been assured that I too must return before dark, the pilot prepared for takeoff.

It was early in the dry season, so the weather was fine and visibility no problem. We were hardly in the air, however, when it occurred to me that the pilot might have chosen the wrong thing to worry about. The H-34 vibrated and shuddered as if trying to tear itself apart, and I wondered if the main rotor was about to fail. This behavior turned out to be the nature of the beast, so I turned my attention back to my fluttering map sheet.

I recognized Ta Viang by the nearby paddy field dikes that had been flattened to allow Sutphin's Helio to land. Only one person could be seen, a man in the black pajama-like shirt and trousers characteristic of Hmong dress. We hovered, then dropped onto the paddy field in a choking cloud of dust. Pranet and I made our way to the villager, who looked stunned by the noise and dirt. The man understood enough Lao for us to ask: "Where is Vang Pao?" He said he knew and would serve as our guide.

By this time—we had been in the air for over an hour—the sun was setting, and the pilot insisted on leaving. My orders to return did not apply to Pranet, who had no orders of any kind, either allowing or forbidding him to stay. He took advantage of the opportunity and volunteered to remain. In so doing, he ran the risk of encountering a superior enemy force while looking for Vang Pao. Feeling guilty about leaving Pranet and his men but having no choice, I climbed into the co-pilot's seat of the H-34 for the flight back to Vientiane.

A radio message from Pranet the following morning made me feel like a Tibetan Buddhist elder who had just found the next Dalai Lama: "Come back. This is the guy we've been looking for." Jorgy lent me the H-34 I had used the previous day, and the pilot took off on the now familiar route to Ta Viang.

Pranet and Vang Pao met me at the landing pad, and I was immediately struck by the vitality and expressiveness of the latter's round, boyish face and narrow, Asian eyes. He and Pranet already seemed like fast friends—as they indeed would become—as they led me to a rough, outdoor table on the bank of the Sane River.

As we walked, I could see the eager responsiveness of Vang Pao's men and the order that prevailed throughout the bivouac area. After General Phoumi's capture of Vientiane, the Hmong leader had briefly occupied the Plain of Jars as the senior army officer in Xieng Khouang Province loyal to the anti-communist regime. The more numerous and better-equipped neutralists, supported by North Vietnamese army units, had forced him out, so it was reassuring to see how well he had maintained the loyalty and discipline of troops even in retreat.

We assembled around the table, surrounded by Hmong irregulars, some members of militia units and others simply tribesmen who had followed Vang Pao first to the Plain of Jars and then south to this mountain valley. In the fascinating exchange that followed, I watched and listened as Vang Pao used the event not merely to establish himself with possible foreign

patrons but also to inspire and indoctrinate his followers. Despite the admixture of some French vocabulary, I could follow his Lao well enough to appreciate his mesmerizing effect on his audience as he inveighed against the Vietnamese Communists.

The communists wanted to destroy the Hmong way of life, Vang Pao complained. They were like the Chinese, who had driven the Hmong into Indochina in the first place. In North Vietnam, the Hmong were already being forced to adopt the lowland culture. This forced assimilation was not the worst offense. Vang Pao went on to describe how, in his early days, he had entered Vietnam to help deal with some procedural problem at the border. There, he had seen Hmong women used as slave labor, dragging logs to a sawmill. His evangelistic zeal excited his Hmong audience to the point that one man tumbled off the bank into the torrential river below. He was perhaps the first casualty of the new resistance movement; mountain people do not know how to swim, and he was swept away and drowned.

The accident inspired Vang Pao to new rhetorical heights. I had never seen such a spell-binding performance, but, as essential as I knew it to be, charisma does not constitute a program. Vang Pao paused for breath, and I asked what he proposed to do. The answer was simple, "Either we fight, or we leave." The easier course would be flight across the Mekong into northwestern Laos and Thailand, but that would not guarantee permanent sanctuary from the Vietnamese. Vang Pao wanted to fight. The combative shouts of his audience persuaded me that he was not alone.

Vang Pao pointed out that the communists owned only the population centers in Xam Neua and Xieng Khouang Provinces. He named the areas where loyal Hmong, some lightly armed as members of the militia, occupied the highlands. If he had the weapons, Vang Pao insisted, he could raise an army of 10,000 men in Xieng Khouang alone. After what we had seen and heard that day at Ta Viang, both Pranet and I were prepared to believe him.

Nevertheless, I found even the promise of that much manpower a little disheartening. True, a force of 10,000 men could cause a great deal of trouble for the communists and their putatively neutralist allies, even as it kept the Hmong and potential tribal allies in control of the highlands. I doubted CIA would have the stomach for so large a project. The US military had the resources, but I knew for certain that it lacked both the cross-cultural empathy and procedural flexibility without which any such effort would fail.

I had no reason to burden Vang Pao with these reservations, so I simply told him that I accepted his description of the Hmong potential as a resistance force and would recommend to my superiors that the United States give him material support. Leaving Pranet and the PARU team with him as a sign of our serious intent, I boarded the chopper for the return to Vientiane.

Just as my fortuitous encounter with Ron Sutphin had enabled me to find Vang Pao, I now found myself with the opportunity to bypass the bureaucratic process that might have fatally delayed a decision on my proposal. I knew I could count on Jorgy's support, but my doubts about the reaction at Headquarters intensified as the H-34 rattled through the evening sky in the direction of Wat Tay Airport.

A message waiting for me at the Air America operations center told me to show up at Jorgy's house for dinner. It was too late to change clothes, so I headed straight across the city to the eastern outskirts and his villa on the bank of the Mekong. There I found not only Jorgy but my old friend and patron Des FitzGerald, still chief of CIA's Far East Division and one of Allen Dulles's most influential covert operators.

My bosses wanted a detailed account of my session, so I described Vang Pao's leadership style, his apparent determination to resist, and the tactical situation in Xieng Khouang and Xam Neua as he had outlined it for me. I made sure they understood that we were not talking about an army to send into pitched battle against the North Vietnamese. What we would get, at most, was a potential guerrilla force capable of holding the mountains and making life unpleasant for a conventional army in the valleys.

Determined to avoid giving the perception that I was merely promoting my own brain-child, I pointed out that, if Hanoi decided to commit the necessary resources, it could defeat any Hmong resistance force—no matter how large. We could never transform the tribal Hmong into a force capable of either large-unit offensive operations or static defense. We would therefore have to be prepared, if worse came to worst, to help the Hmong relocate west of the Mekong River in Sayaboury Province. I specified in this context that Vang Pao had said nothing to me about what would happen if he fought and lost.

By way of conclusion, I told Des and Jorgy that a properly trained and supported guerrilla force could make a major difference to the security of Northern Laos. FitzGerald asked a great many searching questions but gave no hint of what he would decide. Jorgensen, despite his earlier enthusiasm for my consultation with Vang Pao, was equally noncommittal. I left the house with the premonition that, even if he accepted my assessment of Vang Pao and the Hmong potential, Fitzgerald would reject the idea as too big a bite for the Agency to chew. All in all, I spent an uneasy night.

The next morning, I got two pleasant surprises. First, Des proved me wrong when he instructed me to write a proposal for Headquarters, with a copy to go to him at his next stop, Saigon. From there, he promised, he would endorse a request to arm 10,000 Hmong volunteers. Then, at a station-wide meeting convened in his honor, he began by acknowledging the PARU contribution to Phoumi's quick and relatively bloodless capture of Vientiane. We had not only provided the only reliable intelligence during the course of that operation but had helped the ever-skittish Lao overcome their chronic failures of organization, tactics, and plain force of will. "You've all earned your keep," he said, adding that PARU would be a key player in the much bigger operation we were now proposing.

Pranet and I had long since worked out the logistics of that kind of enterprise, and it took me only two days to update it. The plan called for a standardized arms package for 100 men made up of World War II-vintage weapons that I knew to be available in quantity: M-1 rifles, carbines, and Browning automatic rifles, plus 60mm mortars and .30 caliber light machine guns. I also asked for uniforms—the smallest in the inventory—and standard accessories like canteens, ponchos, field packs, and entrenching tools. Each package should also contain

two combat loads of ammunition, one for training and the other for use in initial guerrilla operations.

We fired the proposal off to Washington and Saigon, emphasizing the pressure on the Hmong created by the loss of the Plain of Jars. Jorgy and I both feared that action would come too late to give the Hmong a fighting chance, but Fitzgerald endorsed it immediately. Just two days later, Headquarters announced that it had secured Executive Branch approval to arm 1,000 Hmong volunteers. Expansion of the program would depend on the performance of this first group.

I knew from experience that we could count on our supply source to have everything ready to move within a few days. Air America would fly it to Takhli Air Base in Thailand in C-123 cargo aircraft. There, it would be broken down into smaller lots and transferred to C-46 and C-47 cargo planes for the flight across the Mekong and into the mountains.

Vang Pao and his men were still waiting with Pranet and the PARU team at Ta Viang when Headquarters replied. I flew up to give them the news, and Vang Pao's round face lit up with delight. Pranet was equally pleased, but he understood, perhaps better than Vang Pao, how small a window of opportunity we had been given. The Laotian army column that General Phoumi had ordered to pursue and engage Kong Le was bogged down on the road north of Vientiane, and Kong Le and his communist allies were therefore free to move against any nascent opposition in Xieng Khouang Province. Could we assemble a group of volunteers, drop their arms and equipment by parachute, and train them before the enemy sent a force to disrupt the activity and scatter the irregulars?

From what we knew of the Hmong and their way of life, we anticipated that they would be good marksmen—even with the home-made flintlock rifles that many still carried—and apt students of ambush operations and tactical reconnaissance patrols. We could not, however, just arm them and send them off on their own.

There was no prospect of exfiltrating volunteers to government-held territory; we lacked the means to do so, and the Hmong would never have consented to leave their families to the mercy of the Pathet Lao and the feared North Vietnamese. Accordingly, Pranet and I asked Vang Pao to identify a site where we could arm and train the first volunteers before the North Vietnamese could find us and launch an attack.

Vang Pao proposed a tiny village called Ban Pa Đông, situated almost 4,000 feet above sea level and perhaps 15 kilometers south of the plain. He could assemble 300 volunteers there, he said, and it would take the enemy a minimum of three days to mount an attack. Three days was cutting it very fine, but Pranet and I were ready with a training plan for this contingency. If the Hmong had the aptitudes we thought they did, we should be able to make it work.

It would work only if we got started before enemy pressure prevented Vang Pao from gathering his volunteers. His intelligence told him that the Pathet Lao were moving toward Ta Viang, and it was essential to get started before North Vietnamese troops joined them and pressed an attack on Vang Pao's little band. That was the message that I delivered to Jorgensen in Vientiane. The COS was a bit taken aback by the tiny margin for error that our schedule

allowed, but he agreed to take the chance that the volunteers would appear when Vang Pao said they would. Jorgy gave me a free hand to work out the details, and I wrote a cable to our suppliers alerting them to our tentative schedule. I then went back to Headquarters 333 at Wat Tay and advised Pranet by secure radio to proceed to Ban Pa Đông.

Vang Pao and his men, accompanied by Pranet and the PARU team, set off on the two-day march through the mountainous jungle. I knew that the PARU radio gear and other equipment would slow their pace and worried about their being overtaken by a more numerous enemy. The next day, however, Pranet radioed that he had helped Vang Pao's men boobytrap the trail behind them with grenades and that this tactic had, at least for the moment, apparently discouraged pursuit.

This was no time to risk losing either Vang Pao or Pranet, so I radioed back asking for a recognition signal and a site for a helicopter pickup. The next day, with these in hand, I set off with Air America pilot Clarence "Chuck" Abadie at the H-34's controls to find them. Abadie was an adventurous ex-Marine—he later became our chief helicopter pilot—who seemed to thrive on flying into the unknown. He had no concerns about flying low after I assured him the countryside was friendly, and we followed the ridgeline that matched Pranet's map coordinates until we spotted the signal smoke and code panel. We hovered over the tiny clearing, settling in the usual tornado of dust, and Pranet's men loaded their weapons and other gear.

Abadie was unaware that my display of confidence rested less on knowledge than on my determination to ensure that we got back to Pranet. This was not the only occasion in those early days when I feared that, if I told a pilot how little I knew about the ownership of the ground beneath us, he'd simply refuse to go.

We made it back out with Pranet, PARU troopers, and a couple of Hmong on board. Vang Pao had decided to wait for Abadie to make a second run, and the PARU radio team waited with him. The laboring H-34 shivered its way to higher altitude, and we made it over all but one of the ridgelines separating us from Pa Đông. There, we discovered that our altitude was not quite enough to clear the remaining heights. As we approached, I could see that we were headed for the treetops. Perhaps Abadie, then new to the H-34 and high-altitude operations, had overestimated the amount of lift he could get out of his machine in the thin air at 6,000 feet. We had probably also hit one of the fierce downdrafts common in these mountains. Whatever the cause, Abadie realized, too late to bank away from the ridgeline, that even with full power the aircraft was gaining no altitude. He yanked back on the stick, but, instead of climbing, the aircraft stalled.

Now out of control and falling, the chopper brushed the treetops with its landing gear. Breaking through the canopy, it landed on its wheels on the far slope. We careened down, ricocheting off trees until we hit one large enough to flip the craft on its side and bring us to a stop. Too dazed to think straight, I was conscious of a high-pitched whining noise. I knew I should try to get out, but the noise made me wonder if there was the possibility of being cut down by the rotor. Only then did I realize that the plane was lying on its left side, the rotor shattered, and I was hanging down from my seat harness on the right.

Reflex then took over. Because of the danger of explosion and fire, our PARU training drilled us in the quickest possible exit from an aircraft after a crash. Without thinking, I scrambled through the opening made when the windshield had shattered on impact. I started racing down the slope when I heard Pranet's slightly wavering cry: "Bill, are you OK?" He called out again, and I suddenly realized that he was putting my welfare before his, and I realized with a rush of embarrassment that I had done the same.

I climbed back up to the wreckage, where the other passengers were still dazed. With only seat belts to hold them, they had been slammed around in the crash; Abadie and I had enjoyed the extra protection of a shoulder harness. Even so, Abadie was only semi-conscious, and we struggled to get him out of the aircraft while the stench of aviation fuel grew stronger. If a spark reached the 145-octane fuel, the whole thing would go up in a fireball.

With Abadie at last able to help, we got him clear of the cockpit, and we all half-staggered, half-ran farther down the hill to safety. While I rejoiced at having escaped with only cuts and bruises, Abadie started muttering about his future: "I'm going to lose my job; I'm going to get fired." I thought he should be thankful to be leaning against a tree and not incinerated in a flaming wreck. I knew Bob Rousselot, Air America's chief operating officer, however, and assured Abadie that I'd write an exculpatory letter if he turned out to need one.

Now that we no longer had a working radio, we had to deal with the more immediate problem getting word to Vientiane. We had crashed only a few hundred yards from a small Hmong village, Ban Khangkhai. The village chief, the *naiban*, soon came running up on leathery feet with the splayed toes typical of mountaineers who had never worn shoes. He was wide-eyed at the sight of the up-ended helicopter and immediately told me he had no desire to ride in one. I got the impression that he thought our bird had landed the way helicopters always did.

Although we had no Hmong aboard who might have vouched for us, the *naiban* seemed to know of our connection with Vang Pao and gave us a welcome as ceremonious as village resources permitted. As the local leader of a militia unit originally formed by the French to fight the Viet Minh, he maintained an ancient radio that was now part of a Laotian army net under Vang Pao's command. I wrote a message in the Thai-Laotian script that Vang Pao had translated into French for transmission in the dots and dashes of Morse code. The Hmong operator cranked up the antique radio and screamed into a microphone until the base operator at Vientiane responded. He then banged out our message on the key.

What with the need for translation and then transmission via this primitive network, it seemed inevitable that my message would be garbled, and that is exactly what happened. An hour or so later, the *naiban* got a reply asking what parts we needed to repair the chopper. We soon found that the map coordinates had gone through without error, as, just before sundown, an Air America C-47 circled the wreckage. We knew the pilot would promptly report our situation to Jorgy through air operations.

There was now nothing to do but settle down for the night. There could be no help until the next day. The *naiban* invited us and all the men of the village to dinner, at which we were offered mountain rice—far more flavorful than the glutinous variety preferred by the lowland

Lao—roast pork, and a soup of chicken, cucumbers, and a kind of greens I had never seen before. The banquet tasted all the better for our not having eaten since early morning.

Hmong protocol demanded that Pranet and I sleep in the *naiban*'s hut. He offered us the luxury of a European-style bedstead with a wooden platform taking the place of springs and a mattress. We shared a blanket, which did not entirely shut out the cold of a January night at high elevation. Despite that, our bruises, and the presence in the room of an armed guard—the *naiban* was taking no unnecessary chances with the safety of foreign guests—we slept. Even the sound of artillery fire from the direction of the Plain of Jars failed to mar the sense of complete security that the two of us always felt in Hmong country. We already believed—and experience later confirmed—that, when the Hmong swore allegiance, they meant what they said.

We slept, I say, but only until about four, when a blood-curdling scream just outside the hut flung Pranet and me off the bed, frantically grabbing for our weapons. For a moment, I was sure that my feeling of security had been my undoing, but the racket involved nothing more threatening than breakfast. The women of the village had just slaughtered a pig in honor of their guests, and before long strips of pork were being grilled over an open fire.

Not long after sunrise, another H-34 roared in to pick us up. The new craft, shuddering just like its predecessor, got us across the ridgeline to Ban Pa Đông. As we cleared the ridge, cumulus clouds surrounded the neighboring mountaintops. The lower elevations were swathed in stratus clouds, and the village sat above this bank of white on a sloping ridgeline that ended in a precipitous drop toward the clouds below. In the dead silence that followed when the rotor stopped cutting the air, the place had an odd, otherworldly aura. We might have just landed in Shangri-la.

The Hmong, however, found nothing the least exotic about Pa Đông. For them, the terrain was commonplace and the village situated the way many Hmong villages are, on a mountain-top accessible on land only by a steeply sloping footpath. They were already at work hacking out the airstrip that would liberate us from dependence on the slow and over-committed helicopters. The strip followed the ridgeline, beginning at the cliff edge and running uphill toward the nearly vertical face of the mountain.

In the years that followed, the Hmong built dozens of these strips. They took it for granted that the Air America pilots serving them needed no margin for error. As at Pa Đông, most of the strips required the Helio to make its approach directly toward the side of a mountain. The approach had to be right the first time, because, if a last-second downdraft or other mischance forced the pilot to go around for a second try, he would crash into the mountain before he could complete his turn.

Flying the Helio demanded steady nerves, superior coordination, and a certain native optimism; not every pilot who was hired for the project stayed to complete his contract. Those who did came to rely on the unique performance of this weird little craft.

By the end of the first day at Pa Đông, I was confident that it could serve as a site for the initial weapons drop and training program. Our airstrip was not yet in service and, in any case, would never accommodate anything larger than light STOL aircraft like the Helio. It

could already serve as a drop zone, however, and I was eager to make final arrangements for delivery. The enemy would surely find out about the activity at our new command post, and we might not have much time.

Chuck Abadie joined me as a passenger for the return to Vientiane. I left him there and, after checking in with Jorgy to confirm that the weapons had arrived in Takhli, flew on to accompany the drop mission to Pa Đông.

We flew directly from Takhli to Pa Đông in three C-46 cargo aircraft, each carrying enough weapons and equipment for 100 men. The drop zone was only a few miles from the nearest enemy troops, and I feared that the loss of an aircraft on the very first mission would have catastrophic consequences, especially in Washington. To avoid that, I flew in the lead plane, standing behind the pilot to make sure that we followed the safest route to the drop zone.

I saw the smoke signal before anything else, but I hardly needed it. Vang Pao had assembled his 300 volunteers around the air strip. Families from nearby villages were also on hand, the women dressed in holiday finery and village and district chiefs in their Ministry of Interior uniforms. We made the first pass, and it occurred to me that we were proceeding just as Pranet and I had always envisioned a PARU operation: there were no Americans on the ground, and I was playing only a supporting role. Once supplied with the materiel, the Thai—physically indistinguishable from the Lao—could handle training, tactical guidance, and communications with or without a CIA presence on the ground.

It was a big day for Pranet and me, the culmination of seven years of preparation for a low-profile program of irregular warfare against communism in Southeast Asia. When I flew back in a Helio the next day, training was already under way, and I had nothing to do but watch.

It had also been a big day for the Hmong, as I am reminded even today when I attend gatherings of Hmong who emigrated to the United States. At these functions, I still encounter elderly people who say they were at Pa Đông to witness the first airdrop. Despite the suffering and loss that they later endured, they remembered it as a great occasion and treated me with rather embarrassing deference.



Chapter 11

PARU Takes Its Expertise to War

“To me, the whole point of supporting PARU was the exploitation of Thai linguistic and cultural affinities with local ethnic groups while keeping the American profile to a minimum.”



Lair and Vang Pao during one of Lair's frequent visits to Ban Pa Đông, "where Vang Pao's openness about what he was proposing" convinced [Lair] of his good faith. Image from Vint Lawrence scrapbook, "The Mountain People of Northern Laos and Thailand 1962-1966 (Volume-2)" (1964). Scrapbooks. 2. <https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/lawrence-scrapbooks/2>

Pranet and I had anticipated having to train on the run, so to speak, to avoid communist attack during the initial phase of organizing a guerrilla force. Having allowed ourselves only three days to train our volunteers, we needed a PARU team for each group of 100. Pranet had already withdrawn two more of the teams detailed to Gen. Phoumi's forces, and we brought them to Pa Đông; the other two remained with government forces engaged with Kong Le and the Pathet Lao along Route 13 north of Vientiane.

From Hua Hin, we brought to Vientiane a five-man team—“Team Q”—drawn from the Pathfinder Platoon. Installed in a house next to my quarters and office near Wat Tay Airport, they took on the job of preparing cargo for airdrop to the Hmong. Another four men set up our permanent base radio station, offering 24-hour monitoring of PARU operating frequencies.

We were embarking on a venture that would determine the fate of both the Hmong and PARU, so Pranet and I held back nothing and no one we thought could make a difference. We picked Dachar Adulrat, chief instructor at Hua Hin, to run the training at Ban Pa Đông. He and Vang Pao—the most hands-on leader I ever met—made quite a pair. Dachar kept a sharp eye on his instructors, and Vang Pao charged from one group to another, spotting the occasional slow student and helping him learn to take apart his weapon, clean it, and reassemble it. Iron Age tribesmen they might be, but the motivation of these Hmong volunteers was all that Vang Pao had promised it would be. Within minutes nearly all of them knew how to operate and care for their rifles and carbines.

We inadvertently sparked some competition when the Hmong discovered that most of them would get the light-weight carbine and that only a minority would get the heavier M-1 rifle. We had fixed the proportion deliberately, thinking that only a few of the larger or hardier Hmong would want to carry the bigger weapon, but they recognized its superior range and accuracy just by looking at it. Having absorbed that lesson, we increased the ratio of M-1 rifles in subsequent air drops.

Our PARU instructors assessed the Hmong as the most natural marksmen they had ever seen, and in just a few hours of training at the improvised firing range we developed enough confidence in their proficiency to move on to combat organization and tactics. The Hmong would not initially mount company- or even platoon-sized operations, so we trained them to operate in three-man fire teams. They immediately understood the principle of fire-and-manuever, in which one man or element fires from cover while the other advances and they leapfrog toward an enemy position.

With no sign of imminent enemy reaction, Dachar and his instructors proceeded to teach basic ambush techniques. The Hmong loved it, especially the instruction in preparing a

trapped grenade—that is, a hand grenade that has been removed from its cylindrical canister and had a string tied around it and the safety pin removed before being returned to its canister. Concealed along a trail or path, the trapped grenade explodes when someone, ideally in an enemy patrol, inadvertently pulls it from the canister as his foot meets the string.

From there, we turned to instruction in the use of heavy weapons. We had hoped we would not need them immediately, as their effective use required more training than we had time for. Nevertheless, we would have to expand rapidly if we wanted to avoid being crushed by a decisive enemy reaction. In every area we mobilized, we would need men who had some proficiency with machine guns, light mortars, and, the famous bazooka, the 3.5 inch rocket launcher.

As it turned out, Dachar and his men got in an additional four days of training before the communists sent troops from the Plain of Jars to attack Pa Đông. The North Vietnamese stayed at home, allowing a Pathet Lao company to test the new Hmong adversary. Once in the mountains, the PL could not conceal their movements from our Hmong scouts, so Vang Pao and his PARU advisers exploited the situation to set up a deadly ambush.

From the very beginning, we had worked on the principle that Hmong leaders would command Hmong fighters; Americans and Thai were there not to motivate the Hmong or to take over the fight but to enable a people to defend itself for as long as it wished to do so. Accordingly, even this first ambush would be conducted solely by Hmong volunteers. Pranet and I implored Vang Pao not to overreach, not to let his men pursue a retreating enemy who might lead them into a counterambush. Later, we might not insist on so much caution, but we thought that tribal psychology required an initial victory—one not tainted by significant friendly casualties.

As it worked out, the Pathet Lao walked into our ambush, and the Hmong opened fire. The surviving enemy fled, leaving their dead and wounded behind, and the Hmong irregulars celebrated their first victory. Cheering the loudest was the barefoot *naiban* from Ban Khangkhai, whose hospitality we'd enjoyed after our helicopter tumbled down the mountain-side to his village. As the commander of one of the first companies armed at Pa Đông, he had led his men into this action, and now he was trumpeting their success. The effect on Hmong morale was just what we had wished. The communists would soon return in force, but, for the moment, we had an eager bunch of volunteers and a respite that allowed the rapid expansion we judged essential to success.

In the next two weeks, Pranet traveled with Vang Pao to the sites around the Plain of Jars at which the remaining 700 weapons might be distributed. Vang Pao explained the program to prospective volunteers, and, where local leadership looked strong enough, he promised to arm them.

I did not go along on these explorations, as logistical and reporting requirements began to absorb more and more of my time, especially after Washington approved the second and third 1,000-man increments. It was, of course, essential to ensure that what Vang Pao did with our material aid met the terms of our agreement. It would not do to have the Hmong squirreling away their weapons for the eventual uprising so much feared by the lowland Lao. Likewise,

we had to guard against rash actions that might fail or, if successful, provoke a massive North Vietnamese reprisal.

I made frequent visits to Pa Đông, where Vang Pao's openness about what he was proposing convinced me of his good faith. This alone did not suffice to discharge my responsibility to Jorgy and the Agency. I also needed a sufficiently broad distribution of PARU teams to help me monitor the activity of even the most dispersed Hmong units. In the final analysis, my ability to vouch for the Hmong was guaranteed by the extraordinary relationship that almost instantaneously evolved between Vang Pao and Colonel Pranet.

I had, of course, taken it for granted that Pranet could ingratiate himself with any partner with whom we chose to work. A prime tenet of the PARU doctrine we had developed over the years was the importance of collegial dealings with client groups, no matter how dependent on us they might be. No one was better suited to put this into effect than Pranet, but there was no reason to assume that he would become Vang Pao's alter ego as quickly as he did. I had expected that, as the agent of a great power, I might have to vouch for Pranet's credentials as a working partner, but the fact was, if anything, the reverse. Vang Pao seemed to accept me at least in part because of Pranet's endorsement.

Pranet's personal history probably helped to foster the relationship. Having grown up in Northeast Thailand, where his father was a police sergeant in one of the Mekong River towns, he spoke the language common to both Lao and northeastern Thai. Moreover, Pranet claimed to be from the small *Soo* ethnic group—*soo* means "chains" and refers to his ancient ancestors having been slaves. In his youth, the *Soo* still suffered some discrimination, and his father's rise to noncommissioned rank in the police was a real accomplishment. That success facilitated Pranet's acceptance into the National Police Academy. Pranet never lost his ingrained capacity for empathy with people on the lower rungs of the social ladder, and it served him extremely well with Vang Pao.

With the Pa Đông units trained and deployed back to their villages, we began the accelerated expansion that would, if successful, keep the North Vietnamese from eradicating the Hmong resistance before it got started. As of February 1961, I had only four experienced paramilitary officers, all recruited, like me, during the Korean War. Few remaining CIA officers had the requisite expertise, most of our generation of paramilitary officers having left the Agency. Most of the remaining few—Lloyd "Pat" Landry, Jack Shirley, Tom Fosmire, and Anthony "Tony Poe" Poshepny—were already with me.

Pat Landry had been in my class at Texas A&M, where he played varsity football, and had entered CIA with me. He had worked successfully with the Thai Border Police, who respected his professional and personal honesty and made allowances for his gruff, outspoken style.

Jack, a Hua Hin veteran, was a known factor. Perhaps the coolest man under fire I've ever met, he concerned me only because of his aversion to submitting written reports. I knew he would not fail to tell me what I needed to know, however, and his capacity to inspire confidence in both his PARU colleagues and the Hmong was indispensable at a time when the irregulars were still uncertain of their ability to take on the communists.

Tom Fosmire was a short, burly former master sergeant in the US Special Forces. A straightforward and totally honest professional, he had dealt with the Thai enough to establish his adaptability to cultural differences. There would be no problems of rapport with either his PARU comrades or the Hmong they were advising and training.

Tony Poe was less well known to me, but he had an impressive professional background in the Marine Corps and then as a paramilitary officer training Tibetan resistance fighters. Like Jack, he had been associated with the Thai Border Police under SEA Supply auspices, and I expected good things from him.

Even with this tiny complement, I fully expected to be able to encircle the Plain of Jars with guerrilla bases before a startled enemy could react. The combination of flexible, responsive Agency logistics and the professional capacity of PARU officers and men would meld with the combative spirit of the Hmong to challenge the communist hold on northern Laos.

Vang Pao recommended starting on the west and proceeding clockwise around the plain. Ban Na, a few miles west of the plain, thus became the first command post after Pa Đông. Pat Landry and PARU team chief Captain Makorn helped the local Hmong leader, Tu Nghia, arm several hundred volunteers before Pat came down with amoebic dysentery and I had to evacuate him to Bangkok for treatment. That reduced my field complement to three, so I fired off a cable asking for Brian Mills, another former SEA Supply man, to replace him.

Meanwhile, Tom Fosmire, who had been working with Pranet and Vang Pao at Pa Đông, took over at Ban Na for a few weeks before moving on to continue the encirclement of the Plain of Jars. A PARU team—no CIA man with this one—was already situated directly north of the plain with a new group of volunteers, so Tom set up his new site to the northeast above Route 7, the main supply route to North Vietnam. To complete the encirclement, I then sent Jack Shirley and another PARU team to establish a command post at the foot of a vertical escarpment at Ban Sancho, a tiny village east of the plain.

About 15km south of Ban Ban, an important North Vietnamese supply and command center on Route 7, the Sancho site completed the ring of guerrilla centers around the Plain of Jars. In less than three months, we had established a presence that no single North Vietnamese military action could eradicate. With new authority from Washington to pay and equip up to 5,000 men, we could soon harass the communists at any point along the roads or on the periphery of the Plain of Jars.

Tom's camp lay in a valley through which ran National Route 6, a grandiose title for the unusable road that connected Ban Ban and Route 7 with the province capital at Xam Neua in the far northeast. Unlike some Americans—including a few in CIA—Tom always respected both the limitations and the strengths of pre-modern cultures and thus effortlessly commanded the loyalty even of men whose language he could not speak.

The Pathet Lao by themselves constituted no significant offensive threat, and it was not until mid-April that the North Vietnamese began to react. When they did, Tom Fosmire's presence under the air route from Hanoi to the Plain of Jars may have helped bring down one of the Soviet cargo aircraft supplying the Pathet Lao and Kong Le's neutralists.

The volunteers on Route 6 had not even begun training when Fosmire noticed the frequent appearance overhead of Soviet IL-12 and IL-14 transport planes. Clearly, they were part of the airlift from Hanoi that supported communist and Kong Le forces on the Plain of Jars. They sometimes dipped incautiously low as they approached the main airfield at Phongsavan, and Fosmire was determined to be ready if they came within range. He had already persuaded me to drop him a .50 cal. heavy machine gun for PARU use, and the Hmong had been issued one or two .30 cal. machine guns.

One Soviet pilot got curious about the little bivouac on Route 6 and dropped down for a closer look. Fosmire had prepared village chief Nghia Tong for this possibility, and all held their fire while the IL-12 circled above. When its course brought it nearly overhead, Fosmire yelled, "Fire!" and the entire garrison opened up. The Soviet must have seen the tracers, for he banked and turned in evasive maneuvers as he fled.

Hmong villagers from west of the camp later reported that the plane had crashed. Gary Malmberg, one of Air America's most venturesome Helio pilots, visited the camp not long thereafter and undertook to find the wreckage. The villagers' direction were vague, so no one was surprised when Gary found nothing. The end result was uncertainty. Fosmire may or may not have been the only American to shoot down an IL-12 during the Soviet airlift in Laos.

There was less uncertainty about the work of the one-eyed Hmong who shot down a Soviet transport that had imprudently followed a ridgeline offering a clear field of fire. It had to have been a very lucky shot, but Vang Pao said he had verified the feat, which earned the marksman a new rifle and a thousand rounds of ammunition.

I have already mentioned the extraordinary sense of security that my men and I felt among our Hmong allies. We had full confidence in Vang Pao's judgment about the reliability of the various tribes and clans within them, and never once did he fail us. We Americans bore primary responsibility for the one instance of treachery the Hmong program experienced—when we armed some three hundred Lao Theung tribesmen at Ban Xiangdét. Newly arrived Art Elmore, a West Point graduate who had left the army to join CIA, was charged with developing the program in this area. In the course of reconnoitering, he encountered a Lao Theung leader named Somboon, who offered the services of all the able-bodied men in his cluster of villages. Art was impressed with Somboon and took the proposal to Vang Pao, expecting instant agreement. Vang Pao hesitated; the Lao Theung of the Ban Xiangdét region were not to be trusted, he said, and urged Art to drop the idea. Art saw Somboon again, however, and was again importuned to provide weapons.

This time Vang Pao relented. He had no positive evidence that Somboon was a Pathet Lao sympathizer and, in the face of Elmore's urging, authorized an air drop. Vang Pao did not make an issue of this with me, but I was aware of his unease and should not have allowed a PARU team to go in to receive the weapons and train Somboon's men. The worst came to pass when the Lao Theung let a Pathet Lao unit infiltrate the camp one night; two PARU were captured and the rest killed. Somboon and his men disappeared into the jungle.

We did not see the captured PARU again until prisoners were exchanged after the Geneva Agreements of July 1962. Meanwhile, Vang Pao was grievously embarrassed. He had, albeit

reluctantly, allowed Somboon to be armed, and he was determined to avenge the loss of the PARU. It took some time, but, using village informants to track the renegades' movements, he located their camp and mounted an operation that destroyed Somboon's force and took him prisoner. Vang Pao expressed his outrage at the loss of the PARU when he shipped Somboon's head to our headquarters at Hua Hin.



Despite the high aptitude of the Hmong volunteers, their training and supervision were labor intensive. As the guerrilla force grew, so did the need for more Thai and a few more Americans as well. Bob Jantzen approached Marshal Sarit within weeks of our first drop at Ban Pa Đông. We all feared that Sarit would seize this opportunity to increase the army's role at the expense of PARU, but he proved content to have the army in charge at Headquarters 333. We met the resulting demand for PARU personnel, and the marshal approved the formation of an additional company at Hua Hin to compensate for the new deployments to Laos.

The Thai were actually better prepared than CIA to provide trained, experienced manpower. In any case, I didn't want a flood of Americans, even as well qualified as the ones I had. To me, the whole point of supporting PARU was the exploitation of Thai linguistic and cultural affinities with local ethnic groups while keeping the American profile to a minimum. There were other reasons to restrict the American presence. First, I had no illusions about the constancy of the US commitment. I believed that long-range Thai interests would ensure Bangkok's continued involvement with the Hmong long after changing US priorities had shifted American attention to Cold War battlefields elsewhere. Granted, the scale of the effort would diminish when the US contribution declined, but the Thai would continue helping the Hmong if only to keep the Vietnamese diverted from any serious encroachment into the Mekong Valley.

Second, I knew enough about my compatriots to recognize the American impulse to run things. We were already providing nearly all the material support. If we attached a CIA man to every PARU team, the PARU would become mere interpreters and assistants to the Americans. My Hua Hin troopers had already showed that they could handle small-unit training and tactical guidance as well as most CIA paramilitary case officers—and a good deal better than some. Moreover, in matters of language and culture they were much better adapted than Americans to the demands of working with both the Lao and the hill tribes.

Despite this, I readily acknowledged that we had to have case officers in the field. We needed American representation to Thai and senior Hmong field commanders, and the station was required to monitor the distribution of weapons and equipment. Finally, I knew that Washington would never consent to rely on a third party to collect and report intelligence on military and political developments in Hmong country. The problem was to find officers with both the professional competence and cross-cultural finesse to get the most out of our Hmong volunteers while maintaining collegial relationships with the Thai.

It was a problem to which we found no satisfactory solution for another year. In the spring of 1961, Jorgy and I accepted a few people, usually of high quality but lacking one or another of the requisite qualifications. One of them, Joe Hudacek, had been my instructor during CIA

paramilitary training. When we began dropping arms to the Hmong, Joe was in Bangkok as paramilitary adviser to Bob Jantzen, who immediately proposed sending him to Laos.

The suggestion put Jorgensen and me in a painful bind. To begin with, I knew Joe to be one of the preeminent teachers of irregular warfare, and I respected both his skill and his fierce dedication. It might seem arbitrary or even malicious to turn down someone of his unparalleled credentials, but I also knew that Joe was wound very tight and that he was rigidly demanding of his students and totally unable to accommodate cultural differences. I feared that he would alienate any non-Western foreigner he dealt with.

Jorgensen's concern—one that I certainly shared—was that Joe's presence might interfere with his lines of communication, both to the Thai and to Headquarters. Jantzen's intensely proprietary feelings about any Thai asset had already complicated our lives during the negotiations over PARU deployment to Phoumi's battalions several months earlier. Interference from outside was something we would prefer to do without.

Jantzen offered to sweeten the deal by sending Bill Young as Joe's interpreter. This was the same Bill Young who had found the Hmong trader I had used to get information on the drug smugglers' bivouac above Chiang Mai. He looked like an all-American boy, blond and handsome, but his style was more that of the free-spirited mountain people with whom he spent so much of his youth.

I could work with Bill because I saw him for what he was. My PARU colleagues had disliked him because he didn't meet their expectations of American comportment in such basic matters as punctuality and reliability. Since those days, however, Bill had returned to the United States long enough to serve a two-year tour in the 82nd Airborne Division, and I could only hope that he'd absorbed some Western-style organizational discipline.

Despite our reservations, Jorgy and I had little choice. Paramilitary veterans, especially men of Hudacek's accomplishments, were hard to come by. With some misgivings, we sent Joe and his new interpreter to Pa Đông to replace Jack Shirley, who was already at Sancho getting ready to operate against the Route 7 main supply route.

Joe's premier area of expertise was demolitions, and he particularly favored the use of explosives in ambush. This was too tricky a subject to introduce to all our Hmong volunteers, but I approved the formation of a few teams that could target main roads and trails or cover withdrawals after major raids.

Bill Young lacked the technical vocabulary in English, which I feared could lead to some fatal misunderstanding. Accordingly, I sent PARU Corporal Manit Nakachitti up to Pa Đông to help Joe with the new specialized training. Manit had served for years as Hua Hin's clerk and assistant bookkeeper, and his English was excellent. He had even translated for me when formal Thai documents overtaxed my ability to decipher them.

Because of his command of English, I had chosen Manit to interpret on occasions when the Agency lent Joe to Sea Supply for PARU training. In that way, he had acquired real expertise, so I had no qualms about his ability to help teach the Hmong. Finally, in a step that

proved to be Joe's undoing, I had another corporal, Suthep, accompany Manit to make sure Joe had enough help.

With his students in camp, Joe set up a demonstration ambush that he told them would be lethal to anyone caught in the killing zone. To let them see for themselves, he had laid the charges down in a draw then situated the students well up a slope within line of sight but out of range of fragments. I was watching as he and Suthep set the trip wire, and Suthep started to follow him out of the killing zone.

At that moment, a stray dog came running along the trail headed directly for the trip wire. Suthep dived back to intercept it, but it was too late. The charges went off in a monstrous explosion, filling the air with dust and smoke. I was horrified; Suthep must have been blown to bits. As the air cleared, however, we saw the dazed Suthep—and the dog—rise from the dust.

Joe was just as appalled as I; unfortunately, he seemed more concerned about the failed ambush than Suthep's unimaginably close call. Just a hint of a sense of humor would have saved Joe, but the incident dealt his morale such a blow that he could no longer function.

The result was as unfortunate as it was predictable. Joe could acknowledge neither that this ragged band of mountain men had qualities the Marines lacked nor that we had to make what we could out of what we had. Virtues like the tribesmen's incredible speed and endurance over mountain ridges and their cheerful acceptance of extraordinarily harsh conditions did not reconcile him to their lack of conventional discipline. Vang Pao shared their dislike; like leaders everywhere, he could not stand to be criticized or reproached in front of his own men.

At odds with both Bill Young and Vang Pao and frustrated by what he saw as the intolerable lack of discipline in the Hmong volunteers, Joe let the ambush incident completely destroy his equanimity. Only weeks after his arrival at Pa Đông, I had to send him back to Bangkok.

There were other casualties. On an early drop, a cargo parachute failed, and the crate of weapons beneath it fell onto the Hmong recovery team, killing one man outright. As mentioned earlier, Pat Landry had been at Ban Na for only a few weeks when he had to be hospitalized. When he recovered, I decided to exploit his bent for administration; for the next seven years, he served as my loyal and effective deputy. I owe him a debt of gratitude for having always tried to do what I wanted done whether he agreed with it or not, even when serving as acting chief in my absence. Pat stayed with me until I left in 1968 and then replaced me as chief of the project.

The next casualty was Corporal Manit, Joe Hudachek's erstwhile interpreter. He had learned demolitions while translating for Joe and remained at Pa Đông as instructor when I transferred Joe back to Thailand. Manit was on the scene when a Hmong patrol returned to camp with a captured officer from Kong Le's neutralist forces holed up on the Plain of Jars. Cocky and arrogant, the prisoner claimed magical powers that rendered him immune even to the blast of an exploding hand grenade. He had half-convinced his captors of his invulnerability, and Manit wanted to destroy this aura before it intimidated the Pa Đông garrison.

The trick was simple. Manit unscrewed the handle of a grenade and cut off the fuse. Having removed the blasting cap which detonates the explosive charge, he reassembled the grenade and then let the handle fly as it would do if he'd thrown the grenade. There was no explosion, just a pop as the fuse lighter inside the grenade went off.

This feat became the talk of the Hmong trainees, and the next day a new class asked to see it. Manit repeated the procedure, but this time the grenade blew up. Although less powerful than normal, the blast nevertheless shattered Manit's hand, which had to be amputated. The explosion, then totally mystifying to me, was later explained by CIA experts as probably the result of some part of the fuse not having been removed. Enough heat and pressure had been generated by that small amount of residual fuse to permit a low-order explosion. Manit was eligible for a disability retirement but instead returned to Pa Đông, where he continued as a demolitions instructor—one who could be certain of getting his students' attention when he taught safety.

Tony Poe had the constitution of a horse, and physical survival was not part of his problem. Like Joe Hudacek, he had mastered the entire range of paramilitary skills, but—also like Joe—he wanted to transform illiterate tribesmen into spit-and-polish Marines. He never really understood Vang Pao's dual role as military commander and tribal chief and the compromises it required. The two therefore had an edgy relationship, and I spent a good deal of time at Pa Đông ensuring that the existing confidence between Vang Pao and CIA survived this association of incompatible personalities.



Reliable, secure field communications were vital to the logistical support and tactical guidance of our guerrilla force. Back at Hua Hin, we had worked out a training program for students with minimal education and technical sophistication, and communications chief Lieutenant Amneuy was waiting there for the first batch of trainees. Vang Pao had given me a dozen literate young Meo to serve as communicators, and I now flew them to Hua Hin in an Air America C-46.

Theoretically, I suppose, I ought to have secured Laotian government approval for the dispatch of Laotian nationals to Thailand, but I finessed the problem by telling Vang Pao that I saw it as his responsibility. He cheerfully agreed to take care of it, as he did on later such occasions, but he never said anything further about any of them. As a result, I came to suspect that he had acted unilaterally to avoid the notoriously sluggish Laotian bureaucracy.

Looking back, I can see that such maneuvers could have exacerbated the endemic Lao suspicion of feelings of independence among the Hmong. At the time, such considerations had been swept aside by the urgent need to build a resistance large and vigorous enough to prevent the North Vietnamese from nipping it in the bud. Whatever their reservations about this intrusion on their sovereignty, the Lao accepted it. I think the Vientiane government considered northern Laos a lost cause and was happy to retain whatever part of it we and Vang Pao could save.

Despite this departure from principle, I had from the very beginning been determined not only to avoid the appearance of supporting Hmong independence but also to promote the tribes' assimilation into the Lao nation. This had to be done at every level, and, at Camp Narasuan, Amneuay took the first step by training the new communicators in a system that employed the Lao language. Not even the Laotian army did that; as we had found out at Ban Khangkhai, its radio communications used exclusively French for keyed message traffic. No one had ever developed a Morse code for the Laotian language. Over the years, I had numerous occasions to point out to Lao officers who denounced the Hmong's alleged lack of national feeling that their own army still used the language of the colonial French.

In any case, I knew that Jorgy had carried out Ambassador Brown's instruction to get General Phoumi's approval in principle to arm some Hmong tribesmen. Phoumi had assented—but only after some discussion that revealed how profoundly he, like most Lao, mistrusted the mountain tribes. It was clear that, if we bound ourselves to coordinate every move with the Royal Lao Government, the program would fall victim to the paralysis that seemed to typify that government's response to almost any challenge.

Even the hypercautious Ambassador Brown accepted that, if we seriously intended to contest a communist move to occupy northern Laos, a step-by-step coordination with the Lao would have to give way to a broad reading of Phoumi's endorsement. That is how we proceeded until, a little over a year later, Souvanna Phouma returned as prime minister in a new neutralist government.



The politics of the Hmong resistance were not limited to dealings among sovereign governments. Jorgy and I also had to deal with the demands of American bureaucratic protocol, beginning with tensions between the Vientiane and Bangkok Stations. In the spring of 1961, we faced a new problem, finding a role for the US military. US Special Forces teams attached to PEO were advising regular units of the Lao army, and their local commander, Lt. Col. John T. Little, coveted a role for them with the tribal irregulars.

My preference was to keep them out. If even Agency case officers, trained to work with indigenous forces, sometimes let their assertiveness discourage local leadership, what could I expect from a military organization? I had seen US Special Forces do a superb job with the Thai army at Lop Buri, where Americans were dealing with an established military force organized along Western lines. At the same time, I knew that, working with the tribal organization and primitive technology of the Hmong, they would adopt a well-meaning but paternalistic approach to the mountaineers that would inhibit the evolution of the local leadership I regarded as indispensable.

Jorgy acknowledged the force of my argument but thought it imperative to accommodate the military as far as he could. He pointed out CIA's dependence on the army for logistical support of paramilitary operations and underlined the political importance of some degree of reciprocity. In any case, he pointed out, military participation on our terms was better than having to fight off constant efforts to have the whole program transferred to the Pentagon.

The immediate result was the assignment of Capt. Bill Chance and several noncommissioned officers to Vang Pao's command post at Pa Đông. Chance and his men demonstrated a pragmatic, flexible spirit and performed useful service in weapons and demolitions training. As I anticipated, their utility was limited by their need for interpreters, and the uncomplaining PARU team saw its own advisory role proportionately eroded. Even if Chance and his team did not demonstrate the need for a US military presence, however, their cooperative style made that presence an agreeable one.

Stylistic differences between us and our military colleagues remained substantial. One day at Ban Pa Đông, a visiting Special Forces colonel trudged up to the command post from the airstrip. The communists were close enough to deliver harassing fire with an old 75mm pack howitzer, but Jack Shirley sat under a tree drinking beer and reading a newly arrived newspaper. The colonel asked to be directed to the White Star team, as Special Forces in Laos were known, and Jack pointed to a bunker nearby. The soldiers inside had seen no reason to take unnecessary risks; Jack saw no reason to tolerate the discomfort of the bunker.

Whatever the qualifications of the Americans—CIA and others—working with the Hmong, I had another reason for wanting to restrict their numbers. In early 1961, even as it encouraged CIA to expand the Hmong resistance, the Kennedy administration decided to seek Soviet help in brokering a cease-fire in Laos. Saigon's control of the countryside in neighboring South Vietnam had been decaying since early 1960, and the US military presence there had reached some 15,000 men. Kennedy had no stomach for overt military commitment to both countries, which meant that, if we wanted to continue supporting the Hmong after a ceasefire, we would need a nearly invisible advisory presence.

For the short term, Jorgy and I, together with the Thai, put our emphasis on getting more Hmong under arms. Our object remained preventing even a concerted enemy drive from expelling the Hmong from the mountains around the Plain of Jars or Xam Neua Province to the north. It was very much a gamble, for success rested entirely on the ability of one man, now Lt. Col. Vang Pao, to mobilize thousands of fiercely independent tribesmen. He must then exert enough influence over local clan leadership to ensure that US resources were used for mutually agreed purposes and did not wind up supporting clan rivalries or—much worse—a drive for autonomy from the government in Vientiane.

I cannot imagine a leader better suited to the task than the Vang Pao of the early days. His boyish, animated, voluble, commanding presence was everywhere—not just at Ban Pa Đông but anywhere a Helio could take him. He led by example, helping carry ammunition to firing positions at critical moments. He would fly over isolated outposts in a Helio with one door removed and, while checking the irregulars' defensive positions, push supplies out of the open right side of the plane. Once, at Pa Đông, I saw him helping wrap packages of buffalo jerky and French bread for air drop to ambush parties that were boobytrapping the trails leading down to the Plain of Jars. We bought the bread at the wholesale price in Vientiane to avoid the need for cooking fires that could alert the enemy.

Vang Pao's charisma and Hmong antipathy for the Vietnamese and their Pathet Lao surrogates attracted volunteers faster than we could arm and train them. Fortunately, the successful

skirmishes conducted by our first irregulars put Washington in the mood to expand the program as quickly as possible. Not even the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961—and the consequent damage to CIA's reputation for paramilitary competence—produced any hesitation. Indeed, Agency officers in Vientiane were scarcely aware of the recriminations being hurled around the US foreign policy establishment as the last of the Cuban exile force surrendered to Fidel Castro.

Insulated from the fingerpointing that dominated Washington, we in Vientiane Station took advantage of Vang Pao's energy and the PARU teams to create new base areas. By late April, three months after the first drop at Ban Pa Đông, I had fifteen PARU teams in the field, training and guiding about 4,000 Hmong irregulars.

As we increased the number of Hmong under arms and guerrilla bases proliferated, Vang Pao and his staff could no longer supervise every operation. Pranet and I had never worried about this. Our research on the tribes of Laos had revealed that a 19th-century Lao king had sponsored Hmong resistance to a Vietnamese invasion. Those tribesmen had established a patchwork of zone commands, and the descendants of many of their leaders still exercised authority when I first met Vang Pao in the mountains south of the Plain of Jars. This did not mean that they had the skills of military command or staff officers. The trick would be to take advantage of their leadership by doing for them what they couldn't handle while avoiding the fact or even the appearance of undermining their authority as tribal elders.

Pranet and I enjoyed relationships of mutual respect with Vang Pao and his subordinates, but a collegial atmosphere would not suffice. Someone had to manage the actual mechanics of the logistics, training, and communications programs in a way that allowed Vang Pao and his regional subordinates to continue exercising tactical and political command. That someone turned out to be Captain, soon to be Major, Makorn, one of the original Lop Buri stay-behind contingent. For many months, Makorn had served not just as Vang Pao's de facto chief of staff but as a one-man staff organization. It worked because he embodied the professional and diplomatic skills that I had from the beginning seen as the core of the PARU philosophy. He was a superb staff officer, pragmatic and highly organized, but he exerted his very considerable influence in a self-effacing way that avoided any hint of arbitrariness or condescension. Especially in the early years, his unassuming style tended to obscure his enormous contribution to creating an organization that reconciled the cultural differences among the Lao, Hmong, Thai, and American participants but served the purposes of all four.

While doing the staff work, Makorn and his PARU colleagues gradually introduced Hmong colleagues to the intricacies of managing and supporting a dispersed combat force. In addition, as I have described, they supplemented indigenous combat leadership at guerrilla outposts like Phou Muang-Ngat and Phou Phathi. There was never any question of substituting foreign command for local authority, however. The Hmong were fighting for their tribal patrimony, not for foreign masters, and no one wanted it any other way.

This requirement put a heavy burden on the Hmong leadership, a burden only partly relieved by Vang Pao's one-man-band command style. Fortunately for all of us, his style reflected practical necessity, not concern for his personal authority. Any competent

subordinate could count on finding himself dashing around the countryside with full authority to deal with the crisis of the moment. Foremost among this small group was Capt. Youa Vang Ly. He had served with Vang Pao, probably as a noncommissioned officer, in the French colonial forces and had developed into an extraordinarily brave and resourceful combat leader. He became Vang Pao's alter ego, flying off to organize the defense of threatened outposts or organizing ambushes and raids on a scale that exceeded the capacity of local commanders.

Meanwhile, the PARU role in supporting and influencing Vang Pao was reinforced by Lt. Rachane, who became Vang Pao's unofficial aide de camp and functioned in this capacity throughout the war. With this tiny cadre of advisers—Pranet and me at the policy level and Makorn, Rachane, Dachar, and a few others—we achieved precisely the kind of tripartite arrangement I had always envisioned in my work with PARU. The US presence could be dispensed with if policy required. Pranet could represent me to Vang Pao, and Tony, as chief instructor, was already in effect subordinated to Makorn, who developed the training program for Vang Pao's approval.

Things changed in later years, but, at this point, US and PARU advisers lived together, with PARU handling the cooking chores. When I visited, I usually ate with Vang Pao at a long table crowded with local villagers and any travelers, Hmong or Lao, who chanced to be there when he arrived. He talked to all of them, and it became clear that his total accessibility gave him a first-hand sense of the mood of his people.

It was at one of these occasions that I learned of the problem posed by the Feet of the Terrible Chicken. The animist Hmong believed in spirits and omens, and chicken, a mainstay of their diet, provided one means of augury. Boiled whole in broth, a chicken's feet would curl in ways that allowed certain elders to read the future. This became an impediment when significant combat operations, designed to exploit a fleeting opportunity, had to be canceled because of unfavorable omens. Vang Pao, as much an animist as any of them, somehow found a way around this. As time passed, the incidence of unfavorable omens declined; rumor had it that he had found a secret ingredient that induced chicken feet to curl in a propitious direction.



One of the new PARU teams set up the guerrilla base at Phou Bia, a rugged mountain overlooking the Plain of Jars and dominating the approaches from the south. A strong presence on high ground there would inhibit enemy movement against our bases south of the plain, and Pranet and I assigned a team led by one of our best men, Dachar Adulrat, to train the volunteers in that area.

The Phou Bia volunteers were unique in being a community of converts to Catholicism. It was said that a missionary priest had spent many years among them and had so ingratiated himself that they accepted his religion as a sign of respect. Part of their motivation to fight lay in their anger at communist depredations in their village; marauding Pathet Lao troops had recently burned down their little church. They were busy rebuilding it when Dachar arrived, but the statuary they venerated had been destroyed. They told Dachar they would not be ready to take on the communists until their new house of worship was complete.

Any PARU team leader would have recognized the religious needs of these Hmong—respect for cultural values was a part of our operational doctrine—but Dachar, a Muslim raised in predominantly Buddhist Thailand, was particularly sensitive to the issue, and he took up their cause in a radio message to us in Vientiane. We had never before received a requisition for a “brass Jesus,” as he described it, so we took the matter to a local missionary, Father Luke Bouchard. He interpreted the request as referring to a crucifix and promptly obtained one. We delivered it on the next Helio flight to Phou Bia. The villagers declared themselves ready to fight, and we sent Air America C-46 transport planes to drop arms and equipment.

In the course of this exercise, Phou Bia became the site of our first fatal airplane crash. We had lost aircraft before, including the H-34 in which Pranet and I were trying to reach Pa Đông, but in every case the passengers and crew had survived. At Phou Bia, our luck changed.

We never found out what went wrong. The weather was clear that day except for a cloud formation around the peak itself. As the dominant local terrain feature, the mountain served as a navigational check point for everyone flying in the area. Dachar and his men watched in astonishment as the C-46 completed a pass and then turned directly toward the clouds and the mountain whose peak they obscured. Dachar screamed into his radio, but the pilot wasn't listening or somehow misunderstood—although Dachar's English was excellent. The aircraft droned on into the cloud cover and disappeared; a few seconds later the echoing explosion of the crash confirmed its fate.

Other planes went down in circumstances that the dry language of accident investigators attributed to “pilot error.” Each case differed in detail, but I know that the underlying cause of most of them was simply fatigue. Some of our pilots were flying three times the hours allowed to pilots working for scheduled passenger airlines in the United States. They were doing so, especially in the early days, in the almost total absence of modern communications and navigational aids. In the beginning, the only navigational aid in Laos was a single radio beacon in Vientiane.

Phou Bia was still much on my mind when we got another flying visit from East Asia Division Chief Des FitzGerald. He wanted a first-hand look at one or two upcountry sites, and I decided to take him to Phou Bia. The rather exotic origin of the guerrilla unit there was one factor. I could also show Des the scene of our first air fatalities. The site also offered other attractions.

One of these was the just completed and spectacular Helio strip. Cut along a slope near the peak, its lower end was built up with logs so that the finished product resembled a ski jump. On takeoffs, the plane would mimic a ski jumper, shooting down the short runway and launching itself into the air at the end. Landings were almost the opposite. The Helio would land at its takeoff launch point and then climb up the runway, slowing as it approached a level parking spot at the top.

I could safely assume that Des would never forget a landing and takeoff at Phou Bia, but I had in mind a more important equity than mere amusement-park excitement without safety devices. There were no Americans at the site, and this offered the opportunity to demonstrate that, despite what so many of my compatriots had trouble comprehending, an American

presence was not indispensable and might on occasion be a hindrance. Accordingly, when Des had recovered from the circus landing, I introduced Dachar as the briefing officer and sat back to let him describe his work with the local Hmong. I would have gone one step further and invited the Hmong leader to brief—he was one of the senior elders and a Vang Pao confidant—but he had no English. Nevertheless, his collegial relationship with Dachar was evident throughout, and I think Des got the point about PARU's ability to represent both Thai and US interests in dealing with the Hmong.



Chapter 12

The Enemy Reacts

“I never again willingly gave the NVA a chance to overwhelm the Hmong with a conventional, concentrated assault.”



Overhead view of Long Tieng in undated photo from Lair collection.

The movement of a PARU team to Ban Sancho with Jack Shirley in March 1961 completed our encirclement of the Plain of Jars signaled the evolution of the program from one focused on territorial defense to one that could also limit communist exploitation of the Plain of Jars and communications lines to the west. With training underway at Sancho, Vang Pao told me he had several hundred more volunteers at Phou Muang-Ngat, also south of Route 7 but much closer to the North Vietnamese border. Pranet and I had a PARU team ready to go; we had withdrawn the team that in January had accompanied Phoumi's forces northward up Route 13 after Kong Le's retreat to the Plain of Jars. Jorgy drew the line at providing a CIA adviser, however. The risk of capture was just too great, he said, and seizure of a CIA officer would afford the Communists too big an intelligence prize.

Vang Pao suggested that we train the recruits at an abandoned French fort located on a nearly treeless savanna, and I acceded. Pranet issued movement orders to Chert Chamrat, the PARU platoon leader commanding the team, and, after Vang Pao's local leader had assembled the recruits, a C-47 dropped Chert's team onto an improvised landing zone. Their arrival was followed by air drops of rice and salt, as well as munitions for several hundred men. Training got under way.

By the time we armed the Hmong volunteers at Phou Muang-Ngat, the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese had begun to react to the new threat. Still in somewhat uneasy alliance with the Kong Le battalions on the Plain of Jars, the communists had only to defeat the nascent Hmong movement to exercise uncontested authority over all of northeastern Laos.

The Vietnamese response began in fairly innocuous fashion with the harassing fire on Ban Pa Đông that Jack Shirley had simply ignored. Lobbing shells at maximum range without a forward observer to direct their fire, they did almost no damage. The PARU team leader took this nuisance as a personal insult, however, and set out to eliminate it. With his deputy and a group of Hmong as porters and security, he carried a 60mm mortar and ammunition in the direction of the enemy. The Hmong determined the enemy howitzer's position and stealthily guided one of the two PARU to a vantage point that allowed him to deliver aimed mortar fire onto the gun and its crew. The howitzer fell silent, and Pa Đông entered a brief respite.

At Ban Sancho, in April, it was different. Fire from 105mm howitzers, emplaced just south of the enemy stronghold at Ban Ban, closed the Helio strip while training was still under way. The defenders retreated to high ground behind the limestone escarpment and sent out scouts to determine whether the artillery foreshadowed a North Vietnamese infantry attack. From these patrols, Shirley learned that enemy had begun to circle in force around our positions on the cliff. If the Vietnamese cut the foot trails to the southwest, the two Americans and the Thai could be certain of death or capture, for the half-trained Hmong could not possibly repel a frontal attack.

Jack and the PARU leader at Ban Sancho were keeping me informed by radio, and, when they reported that their positions were now about three-quarters encircled, Pranet and I ordered the withdrawal of all volunteers and advisers. PARU then went off the air. Only after an anxious night did we learn that all had reached a tiny Hmong village three ridge lines from Ban Sancho.

The new bivouac would be safe for at least a day, so I dispatched Joe Hudacek with two H-34 helicopters to pick up the advisers and the key Hmong leaders. My collaborator on this memoir, who had joined Shirley at Sancho a couple of weeks earlier, remembers hearing the choppers approaching from the south. Listening on their URC-4 survival radio, the two could also hear the pilot of the lead helicopter telling his partner that he'd gone far enough and that, if he didn't spot the signal panel when he cleared the next ridge line, he would turn back.

Fortunately, crossing that ridge brought the helicopters into sight and within range of the URC-4's tiny transmitter, and the pickup proceeded without further incident. The Hmong volunteers dispersed, carrying their weapons, and we later used a combination of tactical radio and jungle couriers to gather them for training at one of the redoubts southwest of the Plain of Jars.

CIA men in Vientiane had little time for Cold War developments elsewhere. Even so, we could hardly miss the failure of the Agency's Bay of Pigs invasion, which coincided with North Vietnamese moves against Pa Đông and Sancho. The disaster in Cuba intensified our sense of urgency, but it was already painfully clear that we were in a race against time. If the Hmong were to succeed, we would have to arm and train enough of them, almost simultaneously, to prevent Hanoi from destroying each guerrilla formation as it came on line.

I suspect that the debacle in Cuba had something to do with the Kennedy administration's reluctance to trigger a showdown in Laos. By early May, we had more than 4,000 Hmong under arms and were close to the point at which Vang Pao's guerrillas could survive a concerted North Vietnamese campaign to exterminate them. Rapid expansion beyond that point might enable the Royal Lao Government to reclaim not only Xieng Khouang Province but also Xam Neua Province to the north. The Hmong would need the support of conventional forces to hold that territory, however, and Washington lacked the stomach to commit American GIs to the conflict. Accordingly, on 3 May, the sponsors of the Geneva Conference on Laos—including the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and France—announced that they had brokered a ceasefire in Laos.

The ceasefire essentially represented an understanding between the United States and the Soviet Union that Laos should not become a major arena in the Cold War. It changed things on the ground very little, however, and Washington assumed no obligation to suspend aid to either the Royal Lao army or the Hmong irregulars. I knew that more action was inevitable, so Pranet and I instructed PARU teams in the field to prepare to evade communist ground attacks. We had no desire to take casualties simply to hold one mountain top or another; our whole strategy rested on preserving Hmong irregulars to fight another day.

Action was not long in coming. The negotiations that were to translate the cease-fire into a peace agreement had not even begun when, on May 10, the North Vietnamese struck at Phou Muang-Ngat, where Chert Chamrat was training the latest Hmong volunteers. From the

beginning, we had counted on getting enough time to train our irregulars before the enemy could react in force. At Phou Muang-Ngat, we didn't get it.

It was still dark when heavy weapons fire began tearing up the Hmong camp. By dawn, it was clear to Chert that he and his men were surrounded. They could surrender, fight to the death, or try to break out.

Neither the PARU team nor the Hmong considered surrender, but an organized defense with barely trained volunteers and no hope of resupply was out of the question. Chert consulted with the Hmong leader, and they agreed to make a break for a wooded area where enemy fire seemed less concentrated. They alerted their men as best they could and simply made a dash for it.

North Vietnamese fire mowed down dozens of the desperate Hmong, and Chert lost three of his PARU troopers. Those who made it to the tree line survived, for the Hmong's endurance and superior knowledge of the terrain allowed them to evade pursuit. Chert and his men, accompanied by the Hmong leader, headed south, away from Route 7 and the North Vietnamese infantry.

Chert had managed just one emergency message before going off the air, and I anticipated the worst. I was living at our joint headquarters near Wat Tay Airport—once a comfortable villa, it now looked like the barracks it had become—and the radio operator had dashed upstairs with Chert's alarm. It took me and Pranet half an hour to find a pilot ready to fly, but just after dawn we headed for Phou Muang-Ngat.

Even without getting within range of the enemy's small arms, we could see the carnage around the old fort. The North Vietnamese were nowhere in sight, and the scene was at once peaceful and gruesome, the otherwise empty landscape littered with motionless shapes that resembled broken dolls. Chert, of course, was long gone, so we searched the valleys south of Phou Muang-Ngat for any trace of him and the surviving Hmong.

It took three days of continuous daylight flying to find the survivors. I was in the Helio that picked up the faint echo of Chert's voice, telling us in which direction to look for his signal panel. We called for helicopters and waited until the H-34s arrived to pick up the PARU men and their Hmong guides. Gaunt and exhausted, they almost fell out of the choppers after landing at Vientiane. Years later, when he had become a general in the National Police, Chert and I would talk about the old days, and I once asked him if he still thought about the action at Phou Muang-Ngat. He looked at me and said, very quietly, "Every day of my life."

I never again forgot the skill and ferocity of the North Vietnamese army, which then had perhaps the finest light infantry in the world. In my eagerness to help Vang Pao expand his forces, I had lost sight of that fact, and PARU and the Hmong had paid a heavy price. I never again willingly gave the NVA a chance to overwhelm the Hmong with a conventional, concentrated assault.

A couple of days after Phou Muang-Ngat fell, Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces began softening up the Ban Pa Đông command post with intense artillery and mortar fire.

Jack Shirley had moved there after the Sancho evacuation, and Bill Chance and his Special Forces “White Star” team were also still on hand. In the afternoon, I sent Jack a radio message with reliable information—it must have come from intercepted enemy communications—about an imminent communist ground attack.

Even without guidance from me, Jack would have followed the guerrilla principle of avoiding pitched battle. He urged Vang Pao to begin immediate withdrawal of his guerrillas and their families toward Phou Phakhao, southwest of Pa Đông. VP, as he was already known to his US advisers, agreed to evacuate dependent civilians but resisted the idea of abandoning Pa Đông to the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese. He understood perfectly well the inability of his volunteers to hold fixed defensive positions, but the site had special symbolic significance for the Hmong of the area. VP seemed to fear that abandoning it would weaken his authority as tribal leader.

The point became moot when a combined force of Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese infantry assaulted Pa Đông. With the airstrip under fire, Helios could no longer service the command post. Under strict orders to avoid the capture of a CIA officer, I instructed Shirley to move out; the White Star team had already been evacuated.

By this point, Jack had persuaded VP to cede Pa Đông to the enemy, at least for the time being, and they organized a rear guard to protect the withdrawal. Jack and the PARU team marched with Vang Pao and his men to Phou Phakhao. The Hmong began sending patrols and raiding parties from the new headquarters back in the direction of the Plain of Jars. Tony Poe, walking with another column, was wounded in a fire fight with an enemy force and had to be evacuated to Bangkok. His lust for action soon had him back with us, however; this wound was not the last or the most serious that he would suffer during his years in Laos.

The move to Phou Phakhao bought us some time to arm and train additional irregulars and gradually surround the Plain of Jars and the Route 7 corridor with a guerrilla presence. No command post could be secured against a concerted North Vietnamese attack, however, and, in the weeks that followed, the move to Phou Phakhao, I used my visits to Vang Pao’s new headquarters to try to instill the idea of a mobile headquarters from which we could direct operations in all sectors whatever the tactical situation.

It was a hard sell, in part for reasons that had surfaced at Pa Đông, when VP invoked the site’s symbolic importance to the Hmong as the basis for his reluctance to abandon it. It soon became clear, however, that he was even more concerned about the hardships that constant moving would inflict on the families of his irregulars. Hmong culture made it impossible for combatants to leave their families to the tender mercies of the enemy. Indeed, the motivation of our irregular troops lay exclusively in their determination to insulate themselves and their families from Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese oppression.

In this respect, the Hmong resistance differed radically from Viet Cong practice in neighboring South Vietnam, where pro-Viet Cong villagers remained, for the most part, accessible to a Saigon government police and military presence. The Hmong entertained no revolutionary ideology or political doctrine of any kind, and the irregulars would fight only if their service contributed directly to the safety of their families.

Much as I regretted the burden on Hmong civilians, it was clear that we would never be able to establish and defend an enclave large enough to protect the entire Hmong population of several hundred thousand. Neither Vang Pao nor his clan and village chiefs wanted to give up the struggle against the communists, however, so we had to find a solution that reconciled the realities of guerrilla warfare with the need to minimize relocating the civilian population.

I had already noticed how cheerfully the Hmong people seemed to accept relocation in exchange for some protection against the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese. Vang Pao might worry about the effect on his authority of repeated forced migration, but the fact remained that his was a people of migratory farmers. Their slash-and-burn cultivation on mountain slopes quickly exhausted the soil that did not disappear in erosion, and every few years they would have to move on and found a new village. If we dispersed our command and training sites farther from the Plain of Jars, combatants' families living at these locations could reasonably hope for fairly long term security.

Accordingly, I set out to help VP find alternative sites. The objective would be to minimize civilian hardship while we built up our capacity to discourage communist forays into the mountains surrounding the Plain of Jars and contest enemy access to the valleys containing the main roads.

It was not merely a question of replacing Pa Đông as the central command post. Up until now, we had trained and armed Hmong, who then became the defenders of their families in their home villages. They could be mobilized in small units for raids and ambushes, but they remained part-time soldiers, devoting much of their time to farming. It was clear that we needed guerrillas willing to entrust their families to a refuge deep in the mountains while the men became full-time combatants, ready to fight when and where needed. They would still employ guerrilla tactics—neither Vang Pao nor I had any intention of trying to build an infantry capable of going head to head with the North Vietnamese—but, with more training, better discipline, and heavier weapons, they would constitute a much greater deterrent to communist incursions into the mountains.

Two types of units met this imperative. One was the Special Guerrilla Unit, organized in platoon strength and intensively trained in hit-and-run harassment tactics. The other formation came to be known as the Special Operating Team; at 12 men, it was somewhat larger than the PARU team that had served as the initial model. The SOT, whose members were parachute-qualified, was designed to infiltrate and operate deep in enemy-held territory, collecting intelligence and forcing the adversary to devote to rear-area security some of the forces otherwise available for offensive operations.

Had the Hmong harbored a deep attachment to their land, the creation of such units might have been impossible. As noted above, however, they were a semi-nomadic people, and the security of their families, rather than rootedness, was their primary motivation. Had they been predisposed to identify that protection with the defense of their lands, we would have been unable to raise enough manpower for full-time military duty. As it happened, however, their semi-nomadic culture facilitated the creation of the new units.

With these factors in mind, Vang Pao assured me that the only real issue was the selection of a central refuge, near but preferably not at the central command post. We could drop rice and other necessities to civilian columns on the march to their new refuge even as we prepared to supply such things as medical care and safe drinking water to the new arrivals.

An early candidate to become Vang Pao's next command post and training center was the Hmong village of Long Tieng, about 12 miles west of Pa Đông. It was less susceptible to ground attack than Phou Phakhao, and the terrain lent itself to a longer, wider airstrip. Nevertheless, we wanted to be sure we made the best possible choice, one that took into account the new requirement for a nearby refuge for noncombatants. Pranet, Vang Pao, and I spent hours doing aerial reconnaissance of the mountains south and west of the Plain of Jars. We were returning from the last of these missions when we decided to stop for lunch in a peaceful little valley near Phou Phakhao. We landed, and the pilot cut the ignition. As we climbed out onto the meadow that served as our landing pad, a dramatic stillness replaced the roar of the engine and the dying flutter of the rotor blades. The unbroken quiet and the splendor of the looming mountains prompted our Air America pilot to remark, "I could spend the rest of my life here." The next day the weather turned foul, and, as he tried to make it to the command post at Phou Phakhao, he crashed into a ridge line overlooking that very spot and was killed.

His was one of many deaths. During the first two years of the program, we lost some 15 pilots and a good many more crew. These deaths were all the more traumatic for us, the surviving colleagues, because they were not just drivers but members of the team. Helio pilots, in particular, were often asked to fly into strips where no PARU or CIA man waited to greet them; they had to take it on faith that they would be met by friends. The best of them, such as Bill Andresevic, developed unique expertise—not just on topography and weather but also on things like enemy dispositions and the morale of friendly units. Since the war, I have talked to many of these brave and exceptionally capable men. A number of them went on to senior positions in the aviation industry, but all recalled their service in Laos as the most fascinating and important work of their lives.

At one point during the search, we held a conference at Long Tieng with about 10 American and Thai advisers and perhaps twice as many Hmong leaders. We worked out recruiting and training schedules, as well as communications and logistical programs. Vang Pao set tactical goals and used the occasion for one of the impassioned speeches that inspired his men to believe that they could, in their own fashion, keep the North Vietnamese at bay. Vang Pao, Pranet, and I agreed on Long Tieng as the new command post and chose Sam Thong, located in a larger valley several miles to the northwest, as the support center for the civilians who would soon be streaming in.

Like almost every episode in the conduct of the guerrilla war in the mountains, this hunt for a command post was replete with incidents both comic and sad. We had already lost a pilot—I had hardly gotten to know him when he died and cannot remember his name—before the conference at Long Tieng. That event required an overnight stay in a traditional Hmong building, a low, thatch-roofed, one-room long house. We slept on platforms, advisers interspersed with Hmong officers. One of the Hmong, turning in his sleep, put his hand on the

unusually hairy chest of Mike Nolan, a newly arrived paramilitary officer. The Hmong awoke screaming, “It’s a bear, a bear!” The rest of us, jolted out of sleep by the racket, dissolved in helpless laughter. The dreaming Hmong was not amused; his people have a deadly fear of the huge Himalayan bears that lurk in the mountains of northern Laos, and he had for a moment expected to be killed by the swipe of a giant claw.



Negotiations at Geneva dragged on into the summer of 1962. One could only guess at the outcome, but it seemed likely that one result would be a reduced American presence. To my mind, this was not necessarily a bad thing. It seemed to me inevitable that, whatever happened at Geneva, American enthusiasm for the Hmong resistance would eventually fade. If the tribesmen were not to wind up the losers, the Royal Thai Government would eventually have to adopt the program as its own.

For their part, the Thai wanted a buffer against the Vietnamese but lacked the deep pockets of the Americans. I therefore thought it essential to restrict American material support to a level that the Royal Thai Government could later sustain by itself. In my judgment, we had to avoid large-unit operations—even if the Hmong could be trained to conduct them—and the ensuing requirements for heavy weapons and a massive airlift capacity. The largest weapon I supplied to the Hmong was the 4.2 inch mortar—and that in very small numbers—for protection of major command posts and training sites. The essential instrument of a proprietary Thai role in the Hmong resistance would be PARU, which by late 1961 had almost 100 men in small teams advising local Hmong leaders all across northern Laos.

The key to the survival of the project after an American withdrawal would be communications, so I deliberately chose to rely on the antiquated technology of the PARU net rather than bring in the faster systems available to CIA. In addition to running their own base station at Long Tieng, the PARU commo team there supervised the Hmong radio net and served as the communications nexus between Hmong units and the Thai and American command elements at Long Tieng, Vientiane, Nong Khai, and PARU headquarters at Hua Hin.

All of this message traffic came to my office in Vientiane, where it was translated into English. One of my officers would review the mass of material and extract everything of intelligence value. This activity developed into our order-of-battle shop, which collated the low-level tactical information from the reporting and converted it into a reasonably comprehensive picture of both friendly and enemy activity.

I was also determined to adapt the logistical system as much as possible to limits of Thai resources, which were much more modest than our own. At Hua Hin, we had long since perfected the art of dropping rice without parachutes: a partially filled bag of rice, encased in a second bag, remained intact upon landing. For breakable cargo, we had designed a parachute made of locally made cotton muslin and nylon rope that cost less than a quarter of the price of an American cargo chute. With such innovation, we held down costs while ensuring a collegial arrangement with the Thai. It was not until after US combat units joined the struggle in South Vietnam that the scale of our operation ballooned to the point at which such economies became irrelevant and Thai sensitivities a smaller factor in American planning.



Whatever its numbers or its hit-and-run tactical victories, a lightly armed guerrilla force could not withstand an all-out North Vietnamese offensive. My working assumption had always been that, as long as the Hmong did not directly challenge the communist presence in northeastern Laos, Hanoi would not make the investment needed to extirpate the resistance movement. Such a move was always possible, however, and, as the Hmong irregular force grew to almost 10,000 men in early 1962, I continued to worry about resettlement arrangements. Vang Pao and I needed to make contingency plans for a mass evacuation across the Mekong, but we were too preoccupied with training recruits and running guerrilla operations to give the matter the attention it needed.

I was confident that, if the need arose, the Thai would welcome the Hmong into Sayaboury, a Laotian province west of the Mekong. Granted, they had their own problems with ethnic minorities, but I anticipated that they would permit the Hmong to resettle in Thailand itself before allowing this valuable buffer against the Vietnamese to fall under enemy control. Predictably, the welcome was much cooler after 1975, when the Hmong represented not a military buffer but a defeated, bedraggled mass of refugees.

Despite my calculations about Thai motivation, I did not succeed in getting any serious contingency planning under way. For one thing, I worried that, if I pressed too hard, Vang Pao might conclude that the United States had anticipated abandoning the Hmong even before any agreement in Geneva. On the other hand, no one else was addressing the issue, so, with some trepidation, I finally raised it with Vang Pao.

He discussed the issue calmly enough and conceded the desirability of setting up some kind of refuge beyond the Mekong. The fact remained, however, that his political stature rested primarily on his image as the man who could save the Hmong homelands in Xieng Khouang and Xam Neua. For him, Sayaboury represented little more than a temporary safehaven for women and children. Furthermore, I think he simply could not imagine that his American patrons would ever abandon him. I was far less sanguine about that but could hardly undercut the US position with him by voicing my uncertainty.

Fearful of having Vang Pao interpret my concern as a signal of failing American resolve, I settled for his agreement to send a small party to Sayaboury. This reconnaissance team would contact the Hmong leaders there, who were not part of Vang Pao's coalition of clans. It would also look for unoccupied land that offered acceptable security and agricultural potential. VP did as he promised, but his emissaries got a rather cool reception from the Sayaboury Hmong, and no concrete preparations for safe-haven followed.

Vang Pao's frame of mind is not hard to understand. With the establishment of Long Tieng as our central command post, we had begun to expand northward into Xam Neua Province, the political center of the Pathet Lao. By July 1962, when the International Agreement on the Neutrality of Laos was signed in Geneva, we controlled a large enclave centered on a village east of the Plain of Jars, Bouam Long, and led by Cher Pao Moua, one of Vang Pao's most fiercely combative local leaders. With the Bouam Long irregulars threatening communist lines of communications and supply from the north, Vang Pao now ran a guerrilla organization big enough

and sufficiently well dispersed to survive just about anything but a major campaign by the North Vietnamese army.

I knew, of course, that Hanoi would find it hard to tolerate a threat to communist domination of Xam Neua, but I was confident that a sizable and well-managed guerrilla force could tie up major North Vietnamese forces as they reacted to our expansion. The rugged terrain was ideal for guerrilla warfare, and I believed that we could control much of the province as long as we stuck to hit-and-run operations and avoided any temptation to construct and defend a fixed central base.



The Geneva agreements called for a tripartite coalition in which Souvanna Phouma would return as prime minister and preside over a government that included all three factions—royalists, Kong Le's neutralists, and the communist Pathet Lao. All foreign military personnel were to leave the kingdom by 7 October, and ordnance deliveries were to cease.

On 6 October, all of the several hundred Americans—including civilians working as advisers to Laotian forces—left the country. The only exceptions were Vint Lawrence and Tony Poe at Long Tieng. The North Vietnamese withdrew 45 men, leaving about 6,000 combat troops and advisers to the Pathet Lao. Washington agonized over leaving anybody at all, but the new chief of station, Charles Whitehurst, finally persuaded our masters that total American withdrawal could destroy Hmong morale. He struck a compromise in which two advisers would stay but be restricted to the then-secret base at Long Tieng.

The choice of advisers for Long Tieng forced some hard thinking. They had to be known to Vang Pao, which severely reduced the slate of candidates. Of the two advisers then on the scene, Tony Poe was older and senior in grade, but his lack of empathy with Vang Pao was unlikely to be repaired. Vint Lawrence, a young Princeton graduate from a privileged background, had served a peacetime tour of duty in the military, but he had no previous Agency experience. I might provoke Tony's resentment if I put his younger partner in charge.

Tony Poe could not shake his compulsion to try to turn illiterate part-time guerrillas into spit-and-polish Marines. Fledgling case officer Lawrence, by contrast, saw both the limitations and the potential of the Hmong volunteers. He also sensed how to deal with the volatile Vang Pao, avoiding the friction that Tony Poe provoked while still getting Vang Pao to understand and accept our sometimes unwelcome decisions.

I had no choice but to play Solomon, and I worked out a formula that established Tony as Vint's nominal superior but created a division of labor in which Vint was my liaison to Vang Pao while Tony supervised training programs. It worked out better than I had any right to hope: Vint's youth kept Vang Pao from viewing him as a competitor for authority, and his understanding of Hmong sensitivities precluded damaging blunders like criticizing a Vang Pao decision within earshot of Vang Pao's Hmong staff. Meanwhile, Vint's sound judgment and diplomatic skills allowed him both to maintain a collegial relationship with Tony and exercise the desired influence on Hmong administration and operations. Tony, probably recognizing his own unsuitability for the primary liaison job, accepted the arrangement without complaint.

Policymakers in Washington, eager to avoid sabotaging the Hmong resistance, made two other concessions. First, they agreed not to interrupt the training of Hmong specialists—primarily radiomen—at Hua Hin and approved our sending additional trainees. The Geneva agreements prohibited foreign troops and advisers but said nothing about Laotian military personnel returning from outside the country. I had expected the eternally timid State Department to balk, but this rationale apparently overcame any objections. In addition, in the weeks before October 6, we stockpiled ammunition in each of the half-dozen guerrilla zones to permit defensive action against the communist violations we knew would follow.

With these issues out of the way, I began to worry about PARU men captured in Laos. The Geneva agreements called for the return of prisoners, and, if we were ever to see any of them again, it should be soon.

The communists finally released a list of the prisoners scheduled for release. On it were the names of a pilot or two and a couple of newsmen who had been taken by the Viet Cong in South Vietnam. All of these were listed by rank or title. At the bottom were mentioned two Thai citizens, not further identified.

At this point, we had a new US ambassador in Vientiane. Like Winthrop Brown, Leonard Unger displayed all of the caution I associated with diplomats, but, when Whitehurst told him that the Thai returnees might be PARU, he responded only that we should do what we could to prevent the communists from using the occasion for a propaganda blast against Thailand and the United States. I had my own reasons for wanting to minimize publicity if indeed they were PARU, but the anonymous entry on the list of returnees suggested that, even if they were indeed our men, the communists did not intend to make much of it. In any case, the first order of business was to find out who they were.

The Soviet aircraft bearing the prisoners landed at Wat Tay, and PARU Captain Surayuth and I waited for the door to open. The Westerners among the prisoners debarked first and were promptly surrounded by waiting newsmen and United Nations personnel. No one paid any attention to the Thai, and Surayuth—in civilian clothes, of course—worked his way to the bottom of the boarding ladder, where he could speak to them.

They were indeed our men, and Surayuth and I hustled them across the Mekong to Nong Khai for a proper welcome. My pleasure at seeing them again, safe and in reasonably good health, was all the greater when it emerged that they had stuck to the cover story that they were FAR employees serving as air cargo dispatchers. After a week of abuse and constant interrogation, their North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao interrogators apparently accepted their story, and they were not harshly treated during the remainder of their captivity. For me, the incident established PARU's ability to hide US participation in a local conflict of this kind, and, while subsequent such incidents might not end so well, I thought that PARU as a discreet instrument of joint Thai-US intervention had just earned its wings.



The provisions of the Geneva agreements applied as much to me and my Vientiane headquarters as it did to advisers in the field, so, by October 6, my Thai colleagues and I had moved across the Mekong to Nong Khai. We hired some boatmen for the heavy gear and flew the rest

to the dirt strip just outside town. Thai army Colonel Chuan and I took a short-term lease on a villa, and management of the program continued pretty much as before.

The main difference was the lack of CIA communications at Nong Khai. Previously, I had taken the text of my radio messages with me on my trips—sometimes four a day—to send them and to see Jorgensen. Now, I had to move my message traffic to and from Udon Thani, some 30 miles to the south, where a communications facility had been in storage for several years. At the time, the purpose had been to ensure continued contact if a collapse in Laos required evacuation of the US Mission in Vientiane. The contingency that had led to its positioning had now become a reality, albeit in different form, and for the next several months it kept us in contact with Vientiane and other facilities, including Headquarters.

Even aside from the communications problem, it was clear from the start that the Nong Khai site would not suffice for the long term. Security at the local airstrip was almost entirely absent and that of the headquarters villa not much better. A larger and more secure Agency building, AB-1, stood empty on the US Air Base at Udon Thani, and I moved my people there in late 1963.

Our Thai colleagues relocated to an army reservation only a mile or so away. I wanted to ensure that establishing separate Headquarters did not diminish the collaborative spirit that had matured since 1961, so I gave the code to our cipher lock to Chuan and Pranet, who could thus find me in my office without having to wait for admittance. They reciprocated, and Pat Landry and I had free access to Headquarters 333.



We were not yet fully set up in Udon Thani when Prime Minister Sarit summoned Bob Jantzen to hear a proposal for US support of a new Thai military unit. This session featured a display of his autocratic side, which, despite his considerable merits as a military commander and political leader, he occasionally indulged in a potentially destructive way. In this case, he wanted to install his son as commander of some new and unique entity. Sarit recognized that the rigidities of the US military aid program ruled it out as a source of support for PARU, and his own budget did not permit any new initiatives—especially as his army already had a special forces unit. He was also influenced, I think, by a lingering antipathy for police control of PARU despite his fondness for what he called “my boys,” who were distinguishing themselves in Laos.

Sarit was very pleased with what PARU teams were doing in Laos, but he did not understand how they did it. He thought that blending some PARU personnel into his army special forces unit at Phitsanulok would enable it to perform as PARU had done; he could then get rid of PARU. This could not have worked, because PARU personnel detailed to the army organization would have had to accept the army way of doing things, and nothing in army organization, doctrine, or training was compatible with the PARU.

At this point, PARU personnel were extremely proud of their accomplishments. They believed, I think rightly, that they were the best anywhere at what they did. They were led by men who, with three or four exceptions, had started out in the unit as privates. All were now

experts at applying an operational doctrine that, along with training and promotion standards, was incompatible with army practice; indeed, it was unique. In addition, assuming Sarit genuinely wanted to implant PARU *modus operandi* into an army unit, he would have been skirting the law, which did not give the army the power of arrest.

Sarit insisted on proceeding, however, and Jantzen mollified him by proposing a hybrid unit of army and PARU personnel. Meanwhile, we at PARU—and the unit’s parent Interior Ministry—exploited the legal issue to ward off full integration of the PARU contingent.

Sarit soon discovered that PARU was still in business at Hua Hin. Jantzen went through the motions of finding out why it hadn’t gone away, but he knew that its importance to CIA in Laos precluded any move on his part to help abolish it. Furthermore, National Police headquarters in Bangkok had no desire to see a high-profile asset like PARU given to the army and procrastinated on the paper work that had to precede such a move. When Sarit died in late 1963, the new unit was dissolved, and the PARU contingent returned to Hua Hin.

Bob Jantzen had been very anxious about his future in a Bangkok without Sarit, but he quickly ingratiated himself with both the new prime minister, Gen. Thanom Kittikachorn, and his deputy, Gen. Praphat Charusathien, who exhibited no trace of Sarit’s slightly paranoid feelings about the police. I think Jantzen’s anxiety about the change resulted from his having underestimated the Thai leadership’s sense of dependence on US favor. In fact, the Thai believed they needed the United States every bit as intensely as the United States thought it needed Thailand. In addition, I could see that the Thai felt much more comfortable dealing with Jantzen than with the US ambassador and his staff. One factor was Jantzen’s accessibility; all they had to do was pick up the phone any time night or day and Jantzen came running. This cut the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which under Thanat Koman had become very hostile toward the United States, out of Thai dealings with Washington, which was thus spared a lot of trouble at a time when it needed no more trouble than it already had in Southeast Asia.

Sarit’s passing brought to an end my association with the second of the two leaders who had led Thailand through the fears and uncertainties of the early Cold War. The marshal had his faults, as had General Phao, but I still see both as great men who gave Thailand the leadership it needed to face down the communist threat. Although neither was a democratic leader in the Western mold, both made serious efforts to continue the modernization of their country—not only its economy but also its social and political institutions. My admiration for Phao and Sarit may well reflect the consideration and many courtesies they showed me, but I think that even a more objective observer would find much to endorse in their leadership of the Thai response to the Cold War.



Chapter 13

PARU as a Covert US Instrument

“American policymakers looked at Laos less as a Cold War equity in its own right than as a pawn in the larger conflict next door in Vietnam.”



Vang Pao and Ambassador Sullivan (left) in flight suits of a US bomber squadron of WW II aircraft deployed to Thailand in the early 1960s. Lair, in civilian clothing stands in the center. Also in the image (on the right) are the US air attache to Laos and the squadron commander. Photo from Lair collection.

The signing of the Geneva agreements and the consequent movement of my headquarters in late 1962 from Vientiane to Thailand—first across the Mekong to Nong Khai and then to Udon Thani—represented a watershed in the operation in Laos. It could have provided an avenue for the United States to withdraw from Laos altogether. Had that happened, our irregulars would nevertheless have represented a major, if transitory, success for PARU, CIA, and me personally. We would have demonstrated that the Agency's foresight in its long-term investment in PARU had paid off handsomely in the Laotian programs, not only with the Hmong but with other minorities and ethnic Lao as well. We would have fulfilled our mission to establish in northern Laos a guerrilla force effective enough to prevent North Vietnamese control there and probably throughout Laos, with the possible exception of the Mekong River Valley. At the same time, withdrawal would have devastated the Hmong and reduced the Lao to vassals of Hanoi. Our alliance with the Thai might also have dissolved, as the government viewed US commitment in Laos as a guarantee of protection against a Vietnamese invasion of Thailand. I could see that the United States was so committed in South Vietnam that it probably would not let the communists take control of all Laos. That would have made the US position in South Vietnam untenable.

One thing that discouraged us from giving any credence to the idea that Hanoi would abide by the Geneva agreements had been provided by the supervisors of the accords, who were able to confirm that only 45 North Vietnamese departed Laos in 1962. To us in the field, it was perfectly clear that Hanoi had no intention of relying on the Pathet Lao to preserve communist interests under the coalition government. The North Vietnamese would stay—and in force. But we could not prove what we knew, at least not to the satisfaction of the skeptics in Washington and especially those at the United Nations. Headquarters was desperate for concrete evidence of a continuing North Vietnamese military presence in Laos, and, as chief of operations, I found myself under pressure to capture for interrogation at least one of their troops.

It may have been in mid-1964 that the first opportunity arose. Like all armies, ours listened to the enemy's radio. One day, Vint Lawrence sent an intercepted message about an air strike on a Pathet Lao position southeast of the Plain of Jars in which the communist commander referred to the presence of Vietnamese "brothers." I had no sooner read the message than I fired instructions to Lawrence to get Vang Pao to try to capture them. Vang Pao dutifully dispatched two companies to attempt contact with the enemy. We didn't know exactly where they were, however; the message referred only to the mountain nearest the Pathet Lao location. In the end, nothing came of it.

Vang Pao's willingness to commit troops to the effort was progress in its own right. The main obstacle to any such action had always been Hmong reluctance to take prisoners. Vang Pao had repeatedly insisted that he had no place to hold them; the lightly built structures in Hmong villages were not sufficiently secure, so holding a captive would be like keeping a

poisonous snake in one's house. One day, when I was talking to him about this very subject and explaining again the intelligence value of prisoners, some of his troops brought in a Pathet Lao captive. For once, the Hmong had spared a prisoner (presumably a Hmong)—at least for the moment. Vang Pao interrogated him on the spot and obtained interesting information about the relationship between the Pathet Lao and the Vietnamese.

Encouraged that the man had survived—at least to this point—I proposed that he be held for a thorough debriefing. Vang Pao did not object but said that he would first have to persuade the prisoner that he would not then be killed. Vang Pao's solution was to exploit the primacy of family ties in village culture by dispatching troops to the man's village to find his family and bring them to the command post with an offer of shelter. With the family safely escorted in and the man debriefed, Vang Pao gave him a job unloading and storing material brought in by Air America. The man became a valuable source of background information and, in so doing, helped validate my continuing pressure on Vang Pao to seize North Vietnamese soldiers.

There were disappointments. I remember a message from a Hmong group on the move in a remote area that said, "Today we captured a North Vietnamese captain, but he don't walk and he don't talk so we shot him along the way." I almost cried. Finally, a Hmong unit reported having captured not one but four North Vietnamese soldiers. Brought to Vang Pao's headquarters by helicopter, they were met by a club-wielding crowd of Hmong women, who began beating them. Wailing that Hmong husbands, sons, fathers had been killed by the North Vietnamese and that these Vietnamese deserved the same treatment, they continued until stopped by the Hmong guards.

We sent the prisoners to Vientiane, where trained interrogators confirmed that they were indeed what we had said they were. I was so happy and relieved to have finally captured North Vietnamese troops that I thought the world would celebrate with me. CIA Headquarters received the information with little comment, however. The reaction disappointed me until I remembered how many allegations of cheating had already eroded North Vietnamese credibility. I also had a feeling that the capture of the Vietnamese, so long after the requirement had been levied, was seen as untimely because it might force decisions about the commitment in Laos that Washington wanted to avoid.



Despite Souvanna Phouma's neutralist orientation, the evidence of Hanoi's defiance of the 1962 agreements hardened his once permissive attitude toward the communists, and this opened the way for improvement in the Thai-American relationship with him. Our ambassador was and would remain the main channel of US communication with Souvanna, but, around the end of 1962, we acquired a new ally in the constant effort to persuade the prime minister to take a more actively anti-communist stance. This was the new chief of the Thai military team in Laos, Lt. Col. Vitoon Yasawat. He would become the most effective intermediary with Souvanna for both the United States and his bosses in Bangkok, and my job as manager of our paramilitary operations made me the principal contact on the US side.

As an army officer, Vitoon might have been expected to favor the military component of the modest Thai presence in Laos, and I think that, when he took over as commander of HQs

333, he intended to replace PARU with RTA personnel. As time went by and he saw how RTA personnel performed up country, however, he came to realize that PARU was much better suited to the role in Laos than the army could ever be. Regulars could function very well when they went in as units operating under their own command, but they did not do as well working with the Hmong or with Laotian army units. PARU, by contrast, had trained for years to work with and guide non-Thai partners—mountain people in Thailand included—without making them feel they were losing their tribal or ethnic identity. As a result, whatever his original intentions, Vitoon kept PARU as the main instrument of the Thai participation in ground military operations—even in guiding allied airstrikes.

When Vitoon undertook to establish a close working relationship with Souvanna, my role as his US counterpart gained a diplomatic dimension. He had the advantage of a family relationship, as his wife belonged to the Thai royal family and Souvanna's to the Laotian royal family; in addition, there had been some intermarriage between the two. As time passed, Souvanna even invited Vitoon to station a resident liaison officer in the prime minister's residence.

Vitoon ended up on very good terms with almost all elements of the coalition Royal Lao Government except, of course, its communist members. I have often wondered how he managed it, and I think it may have been because most senior Lao officials had doubts about the longevity of their government and wanted a parachute if things went south. Cordial relations with senior Thai officials were the first step toward survival in a crisis; they would only have to cross the Mekong to get to safety.

Whatever their basis, these connections produced useful information on Lao perceptions and plans. Vitoon began to make frequent trips from Udon Thani to Vientiane to see the prime minister, and I got the impression that he had a much closer relationship with Souvanna than did any American official. I suspect that this boosted his standing with his own government as well. Vitoon used both these relationships and his channel to Bangkok to advance the interests of all three parties: the Royal Thai Government, the United States, and himself (his interest being an intense drive for promotion). He would walk into my Udon Thani office after a trip to Vientiane, call for my reports officer, and give her the same report—most of it, anyway—that he would then carry to Bangkok. When Ambassador Bill Sullivan wanted something from Souvanna that was likely to meet resistance, I sometimes took the problem to Vitoon, who would undertake to lay the groundwork with the prime minister before the ambassador made his approach.

It did not take long to see that Vitoon was a straight shooter. He might crave preferment, but his way to get it was to negotiate with us the best possible deals for Bangkok and then make sure we got our money's worth. One result of his extraordinary diplomatic skills was the creation of a direct link between his Headquarters 333 and the office of Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn. Vitoon somehow managed to use it to advance the interests of the project without antagonizing the Royal Thai army command that he had thus effectively bypassed.

Vitoon and I became friends—and not because I always indulged him. After 15 years of exposure to Thai culture, I knew how to deflect a request without giving offense. We actually

had some rather intense discussions about the scale of US support for Thai participation, but I think we usually wound up feeling that both of us had achieved the best possible bargain. The relationship between Udon Thani Base and Headquarters 333 flourished until the end of Vitoon's service in 1972. When I returned to Bangkok in 1970, our friendship and mutual professional respect proved crucial to my work with the government in Bangkok as the Thai escalated their commitment in Laos in the last years of the war.



In May 1964, as the communists put more pressure on neutralist forces, Souvanna Phouma asked for US air strikes to support his troops. I saw this as a big boost for the Hmong and for Savannakhet-based Gen. Phoumi's forces as well, for it brought together all the non-communist elements in an unprecedented way. It was confirmation that Souvanna had finally come to see the futility of trying to cooperate with the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese and accepted the need to deal with them only from a position of strength. I mean relative strength, with Vientiane and its allies capable of exacting a heavy price for any advances that Hanoi might make.

The fight now joined by Souvanna Phouma consisted of two very different kinds of combat. Although we were engaged in guerrilla warfare in both northern Laos and the Panhandle, the situations could hardly have been more different. In the north, especially in Hmong territory, the object was to challenge the enemy's control of his rear area and his lines of communication. There was no contest for control of the civilian population, for, if the Hmong irregulars could not prevent North Vietnamese incursions into an area, they took their families with them when they withdrew.

In the mid-1960s, the civilian-military equation in the eastern panhandle, away from the Mekong River, more nearly resembled that in Vietnam. Villagers usually remained in place while the military of both sides—Vietnamese and Pathet Lao on one side and the Laotian army and our irregulars on the other—tried to command civilian loyalty and use the villagers for food and other supplies, as well as for intelligence on the adversary.

The irregular troops in Central and South Laos were composed of lowland Lao and of non-Lao minorities who lived on the lower slopes of the Annamite Chain. When well led, they often displayed real fortitude, but in general their fighting spirit did not match that of the Hmong. In addition, they were vastly outnumbered by the communists throughout their areas of operations. Any substantial level of offensive operations would provoke an overwhelming North Vietnamese reaction. Therefore, although many—probably most—of the villagers favored our men and the Royal Lao Government, we kept a low profile. Our men survived on airdropped supplies and what they could surreptitiously buy in the villages.

All of this meant that we had to make a virtue of necessity in the Panhandle, using our teams of irregulars primarily for intelligence rather than to attack enemy camps or supply columns along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The intelligence was urgently needed, especially after the fall of 1964, when Hanoi began sending combat units—not just advisers and materiel—along the Ho Chi Minh Trail into South Vietnam.

Neither our road watch teams nor any other US intelligence assets warned of the accelerated North Vietnamese infiltration into South Vietnam that began late that year. Because of continuing Government of Vietnam reverses in the countryside, however, the United States had already launched its own escalation. President Johnson cashed the blank check the Congress gave him with the Tonkin Gulf Resolution of August 1964 and began bombing military targets in North Vietnam. This was followed by the dispatch of the first US ground forces to the South, and, by the summer of 1965, American troops were in combat in both the jungles and the high valleys of South Vietnam.

The decision to deploy American troops to South Vietnam was accompanied by the appointment of William Sullivan as ambassador to Laos in December 1964. His American military counterpart was General William Westmoreland, who headed the Military Assistance Command/Vietnam (MACV). Both were strong-minded leaders, and their conflicting views on the rules of engagement in Indochina had a major impact on CIA operations there.

Westmoreland rightly saw the eastern Laotian Panhandle as a refuge and supply corridor for the North Vietnamese army. He was well aware that CIA-sponsored efforts there were providing useful intelligence and tying down substantial communist forces. He also knew that Hanoi's use of the corridor had been disrupted neither by our efforts nor by the aerial bombing that began early in 1965. Accordingly, he sought a larger role for his command in the effort to deny Laotian sanctuary to the North Vietnamese.

This aim brought Westmoreland into direct conflict with Ambassador Sullivan, whose opposition to greater MACV involvement in the corridor rested on a policy decision that followed the signing of the Geneva agreements. The Johnson White House and the State Department wanted to limit the American military investment in Laos and to encourage Hanoi to do the same. The 1962 Geneva agreements were the instrument of this policy, and, unless they were to be abandoned, the United States had to maintain the low profile of its military presence in Laos. Accordingly, Sullivan and Washington wanted CIA to handle operations everywhere in Laos except for a narrow stretch along the border with South Vietnam.

This policy abetted what I saw as Sullivan's pretensions as a de facto commander of troops in the field. It was clear to me from my dealings with him that he enjoyed his authority over the irregular forces and the influence over the Laotian army conferred by his control of US material aid and US Air Force tactical air support. Early in the competition with MACV, he fended off a proposal to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail by invading Laos and countered with a proposal of his own. Instead of invading Laos, he argued, the US army should cut the pipeline at its narrowest point by attacking North Vietnam just above the demilitarized zone at the 17th parallel. This ploy was not only clever—he was able to attribute it to a US army general—but also reasonable, for the complexities of the Ho Chi Minh Trail network would be far more difficult to deal with than the choke points at the DMZ.

MACV stuck to its insistence on implementing its own plan, which would have required a massive increase in US forces. Westmoreland probably could not have talked Washington into anything close to the required build-up, however, even had Sullivan supported the idea. As it

was, the proposal died, and Sullivan retained nearly full control over the deployment of US military resources in Laos.

I shared Sullivan's view that cutting the trail above the DMZ made more sense than a ground campaign in the Laotian Panhandle, but, even so, I had serious doubts about its prudence given what I saw as the transitory nature of the US commitment in Laos. I feared that a US campaign on Laotian territory would provoke a decisive commitment of North Vietnamese ground forces, which would almost certainly be disastrous for the Lao. I was convinced that the only way to avoid such an outcome was to continue the limited programs I was running for my chief of station on behalf of the ambassador and Washington. If we could avoid a full-fledged invasion by Hanoi, the Lao would have at least a chance, with covert help from Thailand, to preserve their independence.



At this point, early 1965, I had had teams of ethnic Lao irregulars in the eastern Panhandle for four years. They were collecting useful information about the traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but they were far too few to get anything resembling full intelligence coverage of the movement of enemy troops and supplies through Laos and around the demilitarized zone. With the change in the tactical situation, we were flooded with demands from Saigon and Washington for more and better intelligence—reported more quickly.

Some of this pressure had an ulterior motive. MACV had always hungered for a more active role in Laos, but Washington's determination to keep US involvement there inconspicuous had stood in the way. We at Udon Thani had our own reasons to support that position; it always seemed to us that the military wanted to bite off more than it could chew. I had nothing but the highest regard for the US Army Special Forces, but they had tried before to lead Vietnamese mountain tribesmen into Laos and had been frustrated by the distances, the forbidding terrain, and the limitations of the tribesmen as soldiers.

Nevertheless, the need for intelligence would not wait, so we worked through Dick Holm, our man at Nakon Phanom, to get reinforcements from the Laotian command for new road watch teams. The time needed for recruitment and training meant that results would at best be months in the future, however, and Washington wanted intelligence now on the traffic along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

One alternative was aerial photography. Air Force jets had begun flying reconnaissance missions over Laos in 1964, but their high-altitude missions had produced very little. Not only did we not know how much the Trail was being used, we couldn't even find it.

A report from one of our road watch teams claimed that military vehicles were using the road that led south from the Mu Gia Gap, on the Vietnamese border east of Thakhek. The team had no camera and in any case might not have been able to get close enough during daylight hours to take a picture. Washington, Saigon, and Ambassador Sullivan in Vientiane were all screaming for information, and I finally asked Jim Rhyne, at the time our chief Helio pilot, to see what he could find out.

Jim took off from Vientiane the next morning and headed down the Mekong River, then east from Thakhek toward the Mu Gia Gap, where Route 12 emerges from North Vietnam. Turning south and dropping to treetop level, he saw no sign of any road or vehicular traffic—then an odd shadow caught his eye, and he circled to take another look. Sure enough, a bamboo trellis covered with jungle vegetation had been erected over the road, and one truck was visible underneath it. Rhyne lingered long enough to take a few pictures with his 35mm camera then decided to scoot before he started drawing fire.

The photos were developed and sent to Washington that night; they provided the first proof that Hanoi was now using the trail for heavy vehicles. We shared the information with the Laotian Air Force, whose commander, General Ma, sent T-28s out on a bombing raid. They found their target all right, but the North Vietnamese, certainly alerted by Rhyne's Helio, opened fire and shot one down. Nevertheless, the discovery of even one of the threads of the trail fabric provided the basis for a larger and more systematic search by both US Air Force and Air America resources, as well as by expanded Agency road watch teams.

Jim Rhyne, by the way, was one of our best and bravest pilots, never asking anyone else to do what he wasn't prepared to do himself. That kind of leadership can carry a high price tag, and Jim paid it a few months later when he went along as observer on an Air America plane dropping supplies to a team in the far north, not far from the Chinese border. The "kicker," the crewman who shoves the cargo out of the plane, had trouble opening the cargo door, so Rhyne climbed out of the cockpit to help him. The next he knew, he was on the floor, blood pumping from a massive wound to his lower leg. A 20mm anti-aircraft round had punctured the aircraft's hull and nearly severed the limb.

There was no serious damage to the plane, and the pilot headed for Udon Thani while the kicker tried to stanch the bleeding. Somebody summoned me to the control tower, where I listened to the pilot describing on the radio his race with time. With the aircraft only a few minutes out, I climbed into a base ambulance with the doctor.

When the plane touched down, we did not wait for it to taxi but roared up to where its landing roll had brought it. The doctor leaped out, climbed into the aircraft, and, at the sight of Rhyne, turned almost as white as his patient. "He's running on empty," he said. He began a transfusion even before Jim was lifted out of the aircraft. Jim made it, although his lower leg did not, and he returned to the program as chief pilot within a matter of months. Over the course of the conflict, the problem of aerial surveillance was ameliorated but never definitively solved.

This Rhyne episode brings to mind one of the most inscrutable mysteries of the war in Laos. The shell that wounded Jim Rhyne came from an anti-aircraft gun protecting a road into Laos that the Chinese had started building around 1961. I had heard of talks between the Chinese and neutralist Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma about such a project, but there had never been a formal agreement nor any clear understanding of what the Chinese hoped to gain from it.

Nevertheless, there it was, and, over the years, construction battalions gradually moved down the valley of the Nam Beng River, building a fully drained, all-weather road. Eventually, it reached Pak Beng, on the Mekong river upstream from Louangphabang. No one ever saw any combat forces on it other than security elements and anti-aircraft guns, and, even after

I returned to Bangkok in the 1970s, its purpose remained obscure. Did the Chinese intend major support for the Thai communist insurgency, then at its most intense? We saw no evidence of that. Were they competing with the Vietnamese for dominance in northern Laos? Perhaps, but again, they gave no sign of using the road to enlarge the Chinese presence there. Subsequent intelligence may have explained all of this, but if so, I never saw it.



As the US combat role in South Vietnam intensified, I faced growing pressure from Vientiane and Washington to expand our irregular units to a size that could more effectively help MACV contest North Vietnamese use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This resulted in the creation of the Special Guerrilla Units (SGUs)—at first company-sized, later light battalions—capable of long-term deployment in both northern Laos and down along the western edge of the Annamite Chain to the South Vietnamese border. Later in the war, SGU forces, grouped into battalions or larger units, began to look—and fight—more like regular infantry engaged in positional warfare. The SGUs had to consist largely of ethnic Lao troops, partly because of attrition among Hmong volunteers, partly because of the overall need for more manpower, and partly because the Panhandle, which had relatively few Hmong inhabitants, would be the scene of much of the action. Hmong culture prohibited leaving families at home if the breadwinner—rice farmer, in this case—was to be absent for a lengthy period. As noted earlier, we did launch a substantial program to provide Hmong families with a refuge, Sam Thong, near Long Tieng south of the Plain of Jars, but this was not available in 1965.

Not long after the mid-1964 rupture between the Pathet Lao and Kong Le's neutralists, we received intelligence about an NVA plan to infiltrate regular infantry into northern Laos over Route 7 to the Plain of Jars. Washington wanted to block this access as long as possible and proposed bombing a bridge east of the plain. At the time, however, US policy did not permit US Air Force strikes in northern Laos; the only exceptions involved support for missions to rescue downed American pilots. Instead, we were asked to use Air America pilots flying Laotian-marked T-28s.

I did not think much of this idea because I knew from experience that knocking out a relatively small bridge from the air with the bombs available to us at the time bordered on the impossible—especially in the single mission we would be allowed. Washington insisted, however, and the attack took place on May 25, 1964, the same day communist forces drove Neutralist leader Kong Le off the Plain of Jars. I flew up to the area of the airstrike with Bob Hamlin, a great pilot and friend, to observe the action. Bob stayed well north of Route 7, hidden from the road by a ridge line, but we could hear the Air America pilots as they approached, so we climbed above the ridge to watch as the T-28s made their runs. Although the pilots were excellent and daring, not one of their bombs found the target.

Back at Udon Thani, I suggested to Vientiane that we mount a cratering operation to knock out the road, at least temporarily, in the rugged country before it reached the Plain. We had long ago trained the PARU in cratering operations to interrupt road traffic in areas just such as this. I proposed that we use about 500 Hmong troops with PARU advisers who would walk into the target area, which was not far from a Hmong/PARU outpost. The cratering

charges, which resembled tin cans but were three feet tall and a foot in diameter, were dug in as deep as our Hmong volunteers could get them, and the PARU advisers installed hundreds.

With Vang Pao and Pranet sharing command, we had gratifying success. The legendary “Dutch” Brongersma—flying for Bird and Son, another CIA proprietary—got a superb shot of enemy vehicles stopped at the crater with their crews staring down into it. We got many more photos, and I prepared an album to send to Bangkok for Jantzen to show to Sarit. He reported that Sarit was impressed and pleased with the operation and, more generally, with what PARU had done in Laos. Pranet and I could only laugh, as we recalled that, when we first went into Laos at Savannakhet so long ago, Sarit had refused to consider putting RTA troops in Laos for fear of capture by the North Vietnamese. As for the cratering operation, it caused a substantial, if temporary, delay in North Vietnamese reinforcements reaching the Plain of Jars, and we resumed the seasonal alternation in which the NVA advanced in the dry season and gave way to the Hmong when the rains came.



The combination of Hmong successes and the imperative to support MACV operations against the trail complex resulted in tasking that gradually set us on a course toward becoming something like a regular military force. Vang Pao, usually very canny about assessing risks, did not resist this one very much. I think it made him feel more like a real soldier. Nevertheless, I feared that it would lead in the long run to casualties that we could not sustain and give the North Vietnamese a target on which they could bring to bear their superior force. Vang Pao and most of the Hmong’s Agency advisers were caught up in the recent successes, however, and they seemed to me to be indulging a tendency to overestimate what our troops could do in more conventional combat with the North Vietnamese.

Let me say a few more words about Vang Pao, who had been a soldier since he was about 14 years old. He had served in French army units, gaining combat experience mostly with Hmong territorial units in guerrilla actions. When we launched our program in January 1961, the Royal Lao Government had essentially given up on the northeast, and, when the Hmong demonstrated that they still owned much of that territory, they gave an enormous boost to Vang Pao’s reputation. He was cordially received in Pakxan by his nominal boss, the commander of the 2nd Military Region, as well as by senior government figures when he visited Vientiane. I say “nominal boss” because Vang Pao commanded nearly all the combat-effective government forces in the region; 2nd Military Region commander Gen. Kham Kong was little more than a figurehead.

Indeed, FAR enlisted men had begun deserting their regular units to join the Hmong. Vang Pao offered adequate food, ammunition, and medical help no matter where it was needed. This could not be said of FAR support to Lao soldiers elsewhere, and the performance of the Lao serving Vang Pao improved proportionately. I came to believe that all Lao, regardless of ethnic identity, could make good soldiers if they were well led and given proper support, and that support could even be very modest by US standards. Most Lao seemed motivated to resist Vietnamese domination. In my discussions with many of them, I had learned about their deep resentment of the Vietnamese, a resentment at least as intense as their feelings for their onetime French colonial masters. This derived at least in part from the fact

that territorial units had French officers and Vietnamese noncommissioned officers and that no Lao could expect to be more than a private soldier.

A big factor in the appeal of service with the Hmong—and in the morale of Hmong troopers themselves—was our logistic system and the staff work in Vang Pao's headquarters, done mainly by PARU personnel. PARU assembled the logistical requirements for us at Udon Thani, and we ordered the materiel and arranged the transportation. When Hmong were engaged in mobile operations and had no time to prepare food, we flew light aircraft from Pa Đông and, later, Long Tieng to drop meat and glutinous rice. PARU personnel always planned these operations, and Hmong workers, usually women, did much of the labor and the cooking.



As I have already noted, the war in Laos began to change in 1965, when US ground troops went into combat in neighboring South Vietnam. From that time on, American policymakers looked at Laos less as a Cold War equity in its own right than as a pawn in the larger conflict next door. The impact on us at Udon Thani and the upcountry sites came with the replacement of the scholarly Douglas Blaufarb by the consummate bureaucrat Ted Shackley in mid-1966. No less ambitious than Sullivan, Shackley set about putting the paramilitary program on what I'm sure he thought was a more professional footing. We got a new headquarters building at Udon Thani, far larger than I thought was needed, and Shackley quickly filled it with additions to my staff.

Veteran staffers at Udon Thani had been deeply anxious about the kind of operation Shackley would run. I shared their worry, wondering if he was bringing a cadre of loyalists with which to transform a way of doing things that we thought had succeeded very well. In the event, he brought in only a few people, whom we expected to be like him but weren't. Indeed, one seemed anxious to please only Landry and me, and another was more interested in the nightlife in Udon Thani and Vientiane than in active participation in our program.

My relationship with Shackley was complicated. He was never comfortable with the paramilitary program being managed from Udon Thani and would sometimes ignore us, sending Vientiane Station officers to upcountry sites with instructions for the unit chiefs. This arrangement did not sit well with Long Tieng and some of the other upcountry units, whose personnel tended to develop close bonds with the people supporting them at Udon Thani. Shackley was surely aware of this reaction, although he never mentioned it to me, but, if he had any inclination to replace Pat and me, he didn't act on it. My guess is that he calculated that, given our combined 12 years of service with a still-growing program in Laos so close to the main action in Vietnam, such a move would have been unacceptable to Headquarters. Pat and I worked to keep things civil between upcountry units and the station, and no serious conflicts erupted.

Not long after Ted's arrival, he decided to divide the station's management of its irregulars, with me running the north from Udon Thani and Pat Landry moving to Vientiane to take over the south. Pat turned him down flat, insisting that the current setup was working well and needed no refinement. He did agree to accept responsibility for the south while I retained the north, but we both stayed at Udon Thani. Oddly enough, however, Shackley and I got along

very well on a personal level. Indeed, we developed a kind of friendship and continued to see each other even after we both had left Laos.

I was startled to discover that Shackley's hard-driving, even relentless, management style was almost identical to that of my counterpart at Headquarters 333, Vitoon Yasawat, now a colonel. It was hard to imagine two such people having an amicable working relationship, and I feared for the future of the program, which required close collaboration with the Thai. I was wrong. Vitoon worked as hard as Ted and understood—and shared—his career ambitions. Their cooperation was seamless, and they developed a mutual respect that was evident years later when, hosting me on my visits to Bangkok, Vitoon would inquire about only one of his former CIA associates, Ted Shackley.

Vitoon continued to work primarily with us at Udon Thani, and, buoyed by the cordiality of his dealings with Shackley, Thai-US management of the program continued on an even keel. Although Vitoon had arrived as a lieutenant colonel, he never let that keep him from dealing as an equal with Sullivan or Shackley. Indeed, Shackley had some trouble saying no to Vitoon, who in my absence sometimes won his case without making concessions that I knew Bangkok would have accepted. Even Pat Landry, with years of experience dealing with the Thai, had a similar difficulty.

In any case, Vitoon did not long remain a field grade officer; even before he left Udon Thani, he had risen to the rank of lieutenant general. The secret of his advancement was, I think, his ability to advance the interests of both his Thai superiors and the Americans, motivating each to give him what served his own considerable ambition.

It was at the working level, unfortunately, that the sense of equal partnership with Thai teams began to erode. With the expansion of CIA staff, they became mostly interpreters and assistant instructors, essentially support personnel rather than full partners.



The evolution of the tripartite structure of our operation—Thai, Laotian, and the US mission in Laos—was matched by new arrangements within the US command, which now included MACV. Both Sullivan and Shackley were more engaged in our operations than their predecessors, and these operations increasingly involved battalion- and regiment-sized combat as well as technical intelligence collection in the Panhandle. Nevertheless, the occasional inconvenience they created by inserting themselves at the tactical level was more than offset by their unwavering support of my constant appeals for more tactical air support.

Even after we had established a workable relationship with the new COS, the question still lingered: why had Ted, entirely without Asian experience, been sent to Laos instead of an area veteran? I finally concluded that the decaying situation in Vietnam had moved the White House to start leaning on Headquarters to get more help from our Laotian assets to contest Hanoi's movement of troops and supplies over the Ho Chi Minh Trail and tie down more North Vietnamese forces in Laos. Who better than the hard-driving former boss of our massive anti-Castro program to mastermind the effort? I believe Ted was doing exactly what Headquarters had told him to do.

The new emphasis resulted in the commitment of many of our assets into pitched battles with North Vietnamese infantry, at the time the finest in the world at combat on that kind of terrain. The NVA was no better than US troops at fighting guerrillas in South Vietnam, however, and I think continued reliance on guerrilla tactics would have tied down more North Vietnamese troops and resulted in many fewer casualties among our irregulars. Eventually, our Laotian units began to run out of manpower, and even Hmong children were sent into combat.



One feature of Shackley's tenure was his uneasy relationship with Vang Pao. I think Ted's style puzzled, even intimidated, VP. I had the impression that he felt Ted lacked any personal feeling for the Hmong and was simply using them as a means to an end. Whether or not that was Ted's attitude, the evolution of the war in Vietnam and its correspondingly greater demands on our irregulars would have justified Vang Pao's concerns no matter who was COS.

Where Shackley—and Sullivan—excelled was in the management of Vientiane's relationship with MACV. I soon learned to admire the performances they put on during monthly meetings at Udon Thani of the so-called SEACORD (Southeast Asia Coordination Committee), whose members included MACV and the US ambassadors to South Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. General Westmoreland was always present, and the unspoken agenda at every session was the civilian-military contest for control of ground combat capabilities in Laos. Despite his equities in Laos, COS Bangkok never attended.

Sullivan would begin by asking for an intelligence briefing by his COS, a practice that became a weapon in its own right when Shackley arrived in mid-1966. Shackley always prepared his own briefing, and his careful preparation, reinforced by his astonishing capacity for detail, made his presentations intimidating. MACV commander Westmoreland usually did the briefing for Vietnam. Generals do not prepare their own briefings, of course; junior officers do that. When the general and Ted disagreed on some point of fact, it was always Westmoreland, unsure if his staff had made a mistake, who blinked. With this dynamic in play, the Vientiane delegation always won the argument. I knew that some of Ted's facts could be a little shaky, but our Saigon guests never questioned any of them.

Ted's interpretations of the intelligence always supported Sullivan's policy preferences—which, of course, were influenced by the intelligence—and the MACV visitors were often disarmed before getting to make their case. If that approach failed, Sullivan would fall back on his favorite dodge, the well-known sensitivity of Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma to an overt US military presence in Laos. He would temporize, asserting an obligation to consult with the prime minister. The answer would either be the desired negative or it wouldn't come back at all, and eventually the MACV proposal of the moment would just die.

Sullivan's attachment to his command prerogatives had, perhaps inevitably, a downside. He involved himself in the planning and conduct of our military operations far beyond his understanding of the capacities and limitations of the Laotian army and the irregular troops doing most of the fighting. The result was that I had to run interference for the Hmong with both MACV and my own embassy when their proposals got too ambitious.



One advantage of serving as a manager in CIA, as distinct from less flexible organs of the government, was my opportunity to have a role in key personnel assignments. None of these was more important than that of the case officer for Vang Pao, and I was fortunate enough to have had the authority to pick, first, Vint Lawrence in 1962 and then Jon Randall in 1966. After four years in Hmong country, Vint wanted to leave. I had many talks with Randall after his arrival in Laos before deciding that he had the needed qualifications. These included the ability to represent me and the station effectively while building a cordial working relationship not only with Vang Pao but with PARU and second-level Hmong leadership at Long Tieng. He would also find himself, on occasion, dealing directly with the ambassador and the COS and would need the maturity and judgment to handle those contacts.

Like other upcountry staffers, Jon was never comfortable with Ted, but he worked hard at ensuring that his direct dealings with the COS were absolutely proper. His relationships with both PARU and the Hmong were everything I could have wished. His success, and that of Vint Lawrence, in dealing with Vang Pao boosted my confidence in my ability to evaluate people for sensitive and important positions. After years of bonding with Vint and then Jon in the high-pressure operational environment of Laos, both became my lifelong friends.



I have already mentioned how, from 1962 until case officers were sent back to the upcountry sites in 1964, PARU teams represented Thai-American support of the Hmong everywhere except at Long Tieng. Even there, with Vint Lawrence and Tony Poshepny in the senior advisory roles, PARU team chief Major Makorn had earned Vang Pao's unquestioning trust, serving as the Hmong commander's executive officer. With CIA case officers now at all major sites and the United States absorbing nearly the entire cost of the program, however, PARU's role had been diminished. Nevertheless, all of us, Thai and American alike, were now charged with confronting the North Vietnamese presence in Laos.



The FAR debacle at Ban Nambak in late 1967 and early 1968 affords an example of the importance of logistics and of keeping objectives proportionate to capabilities. Ted Shackley summoned me to Vientiane to discuss what he said was a proposal by the country team—the chiefs of the US agencies represented in Laos—to reinforce Ban Nambak, which had earlier been taken from the Pathet Lao by government militiamen. It was about 50 miles north of Louangphabang and athwart a possible invasion route from North Vietnam that the Laotian general staff and some in our embassy—presumably in the defense attaché's office—wanted to block. Sullivan had not yet made a decision, and Shackley wanted my opinion.

The COS himself seemed favorably disposed, but I could give him no encouragement. The whole idea played to the North Vietnamese superiority in positional warfare. This was less because of the FAR's spotty combat record or a lack of tactical expertise than the total absence of the necessary logistic infrastructure. Even if the Lao fought—and, despite their generally poor record, they sometimes did—they were incapable of supporting a multi-battalion defense of Ban Nambak. I could picture air-dropped ammunition lying unclaimed on a drop zone as front-line troops abandoned their positions for lack of access to it. Shackley heard me out and,

without questions or further discussion, said simply, “Thanks.” Later, he told me that Sullivan had made the call to proceed; I never did learn what Ted had recommended. The COS was later savaged by a historian who accused him of letting overweening ambition extend even to control of regular military operations. My own impression was that, whether or not he had endorsed the idea, the initiative had not come from him.

The North Vietnamese reacted as I had feared, and soon the FAR defenders were surrounded and under heavy attack. The Laotian command had already sent more reinforcements than Vientiane could afford to lose, so Ted asked me to get Vang Pao to mount an operation to relieve the pressure. I did as instructed, but Vang Pao rightly responded that Ban Nambak was so far out of his area of operations it would be almost impossible for him to go to the rescue. I didn’t press him very hard, because I was afraid that his cause would be badly hurt if he committed Hmong irregulars to what looked like a doomed enterprise. In fact, the entire garrison had been wiped out by the middle of January 1968.

This disastrous outcome was deeply upsetting because it was so unnecessary. I had always tried to be careful to avoid overselling my expertise on the war we were fighting, but, whatever my limitations, it certainly exceeded that of anyone on the country team. In particular, I knew more about the strengths and weaknesses of the Lao, both lowlanders and mountain tribesmen, who were doing the fighting and taking the casualties. My advice had been solicited, not forced on the COS or the country team. That my judgment had been ignored suggested a certain lack of regard for experience, and I admit that I resented it. No one on the country team ever even hinted at the possibility of faulty judgment; the blame fell instead on the Lao commander in the field. Knowing that “I told you so” would gain me nothing, I swallowed my resentment and moved on.



Chapter 14

Last Steps, Hmong Emigration, and Farewell

“In retrospect, I think that all of us, Hmong and American, shrank from the prospect of a defeat so final as to require their emigration.”



The view from Phou Phathi in northern Laos, which became home to Lima Site 85, a US radar site used to guide airstrikes into North Vietnam. Vang Pao's troops provided security, but the site was overrun and destroyed by North Vietnamese in March 1968. Photo: Vint Lawrence Collection.



A refugee camp about 25 miles from Nan, Thailand, near the Laos border. There are 11,000 refugees in this camp, 90 percent of them are Hmong people. Photo © Eddie Adams/AP/Shutterstock, 1979.

Until the ceasefire in 1973, we at Udon Thani Base and our bosses in Vientiane competed for US Air Force support with what the military always saw as their first priority, the NVA divisions facing US forces and their allies in South Vietnam. We understood perfectly well that South Vietnam was the main arena, the one in which our boys were engaged in combat. This did not, however, reduce the need for air support for operations, for which MACV was always lobbying, against the trail network.

If we got fewer sorties than we wanted, it was certainly not for lack of targets. I remember a struggle with the Air Force in early 1967 over the low priority it was giving to Route 7, the main supply line from North Vietnam to the Plain of Jars. We supplied detailed reports on truck traffic moving west into Laos, but the 7th Air Force, on which we relied, was almost fully committed to supporting MACV ground operations in South Vietnam.

After much argument, we finally got what they promised was “highest priority.” This time, the bombers began arriving over the road between the border and the Plain of Jars. The strikes produced hundreds of secondary explosions, many near Nong Het at the Vietnamese border. Even this success did not resolve the issue. Indeed, it was never resolved, for the demand for tactical air support across the theater always exceeded available resources.

Meanwhile, the Air Force had its own complaints, mainly about bad weather and our intelligence on trail traffic. We couldn’t do anything about the weather, and, at the time, we had not developed any real-time communications for our Lao road watch teams. Their reports via PARU radio could be as much as 36 hours old before they reached Udon Thani, meaning a truck convoy might be safely away from the site where it was spotted before we could exploit even a high-priority air strike. Over the next few years, advances in radio and signal technology mitigated these problems, but we never enjoyed the kind of rapid, reliable communications that might have allowed us to threaten closure of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

One of the factors that limited airstrikes—even more over North Vietnam than over Laos—was the absence of sophisticated navigational guidance equipment for attack aircraft. In 1967, the US Air Force set out to build two new facilities in Laos, one in Hmong country and the other in the southern Panhandle, both capable of guiding strikes into Vietnam. I was not surprised to find Phou Phathi, a mountain due west of Xam Neua town, chosen as the northern site. Vang Pao and I had visited the area together back in 1961, when we were beginning to expand to the north. That was when I first saw the spectacular terrain—sheer cliffs on all sides topped by a plateau with a stone thumb supported by a gigantic rocky fist. From the top, we could see well into North Vietnam.

The site, which became operational in November 1967 as Lima Site 85, was very well suited for electronic surveillance, and the Air Force sent in equipment and civilian technicians and support staff. Vang Pao provided security. The station provided two case officers to

participate in security planning, but despite their expertise and Hmong area knowledge, the site fell victim to the same misjudgment that had been the downfall of the drug traffickers in the Chiang Mai area. Phou Phathi, like that site, looked impregnable on all but one side, and it seems that both our Hmong security element and the case officers detailed by Vientiane overestimated the difficulty of reaching the radar site from any but the most vulnerable side. Thus, only one side was defended. One night in March 1968 North Vietnamese sappers scaled one of the other three and assaulted the facility. In taking the site, they killed 11 US Air Force technicians. Years later, the number of Hmong and North Vietnamese casualties was still unknown. The Air Force never recovered the guidance capability that the Phou Phathi site had provided.

The installation of electronic navigation facilities had greatly increased the effectiveness of air operations against the North. They also symbolized the shift to a conventional warfare very different from the small-scale harassment and ambush operations that Vang Pao's first volunteers conducted in 1961. We never deluded ourselves into believing that Hmong irregulars could be converted into soldiers such as the highly skilled and immensely well-disciplined North Vietnamese. It wasn't just their limitations that kept the irregulars from fighting on an equal basis, however. In 1967, we were still using World War II carbines and M-1 rifles, while the communists, Vietnamese, and Pathet Lao carried AK-47 automatic assault rifles. Headquarters finally got the Defense Department to allocate 2,000 M-16 assault rifles to the Hmong program—but only with the understanding that the Laotian army would be equipped with them first. As a result, well into the game, our men were fighting at a disadvantage we had imposed on them.



As early as 1962, I had begun to think about using Hmong pilots in close support of irregulars on the ground. Communication would be incomparably better than that between Hmong commanders and Thai or US pilots, and Hmong pilots would be intimately familiar with the terrain. I knew the idea would provoke a derisive reaction among my CIA and Air Force colleagues, but an experience with PARU back in the late 1950s encouraged me to broach the idea with Vang Pao.

At the time, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), in which the United States allied with anti-communist governments in the area, was training civilian pilots at the Hua Hin airfield. A PARU lieutenant named Somboun had been bitten by the flying bug and begged me to get him enrolled. I saw a real advantage in having a pilot on the PARU roster, and, when I learned of the paltry tuition fee, I arranged to have him admitted to the next class. He proved to be a natural pilot and by the early 1960s had become a fully qualified flight instructor. I knew he would have the patience and ability to communicate with technologically unsophisticated trainees, and I could count on him to work successfully with the Hmong.

Finding a primary trainer was no problem either. In 1962, on a visit to a materiel depot, I had spotted two old Piper Cubs—two-seaters with an old-fashioned tail wheel instead of a nose wheel. They weren't even on the inventory, and I got them shipped to Thailand at no cost.

It took some doing to get those derelict craft overhauled, but I got parts from the United States and found Thai police mechanics to do the work. I had no trainees, so there was no

rush. From late 1962 until 1964, after the North Vietnamese began major violations of the Geneva agreements, I had little access to Vang Pao in his bastion at Long Tieng. It took until the following year for him to find 12 young men with the background and desire that would make them acceptable trainees.

Because we had to combine education with a gradual introduction to flying, it was early 1967 before our Hmong pilots were ready for the next phase. Somboun was not a combat pilot, and I had no facilities for instruction in aerial combat, so I turned to my contacts in the 7/13th US Air Force just down the street at Udon Thani airbase. They were running a program called Water Pump, which trained fighter pilots from the Republic of Vietnam Air Force, and I asked to have two Hmong pilots trained along with them.

The reaction was just what I expected: “What! Train Iron Age tribesmen to fly combat missions? Don’t waste our time!” I knew, however, that the American instructors, probably frustrated at not being in combat themselves, were not much more complimentary about their Vietnamese students, and some of them had turned out very well. I persisted and finally made an informal arrangement by which, without involving either the 7th Air Force commander in Saigon or the COS in Vientiane, I got my two best men accepted.

When Vang Pao visited Udon Thani one day in early 1968, two T-28 aircraft—originally advanced trainers but excellent for close support of ground troops—landed just after him. He moved toward the waiting jeep, but I held him back, suggesting we wait for the T-28s to park. He looked puzzled but politely agreed. His puzzlement changed to delighted surprise when he recognized the Hmong pilots we had begun training in 1964. They had just made their solo flights and were about to complete their training in simulated combat exercises.

The pilots were two of the 12 flight trainees Vang Pao had selected in 1964, when I told him I thought the Hmong perfectly capable of combat flying. Since then, they had survived a grueling program that began by filling the gaps created by the limited education of the Hmong people and their lack of experience with Western technology. None of the trainees had driven a motor vehicle or had the faintest understanding of how a reciprocating engine or an airfoil worked. We therefore had begun with an intensive educational program designed to bridge those gaps.

Ly Lue, one of the two, went on to become a legendary hero of the Hmong tribe, flying literally thousands of combat missions—sometimes a dozen or more a day—before being shot down and killed in July 1969. By way of comparison, US pilots went home after 100 missions. Vang Toua, the second, was killed on one of his first sorties and never had a chance to demonstrate his proficiency. Somboun, their PARU mentor, survived the war but died in a training accident.

The two Hmong pilots had graduated at the top of their class. Maj. Richard Secord, detailed to me in 1966 as my liaison to the 7/13th Air Force (and later notorious for his role in the Iran-Contra scandal of the Reagan administration), volunteered that Ly Lue and Vang Toua had made the two best qualifying bombing runs he had ever seen by pilots of any nationality. I never again had any problem getting the 7/13th to take our Hmong student pilots. From then on, Hmong pilots flew a variety of missions, including close air support of ground troops and battlefield observation to help guide air and artillery strikes.

When Ly Lue and Vang Toua returned to Long Tieng, they found it transformed from a primitive jungle guerrilla camp into a major military and administrative headquarters that supported large-unit operations. It boasted a quarry, a lumberyard, and a house on stilts with a concrete slab underneath for the motorbikes of the CIA people who lived there. Earth-moving machinery had leveled the limestone karst at one end of the runway, which could now accommodate four-engine C-130 cargo planes.

Vang Pao had a house that doubled as command center and guest house, and he had built a wat—that is, a Buddhist pagoda—as a sign of Hmong solidarity with lowland Lao compatriots. It took what we called an engineering company to manage this; actually, at 640 men, it was more of a battalion.

The evolution of Long Tieng into something resembling a permanent base did not reflect any change in my thinking about the postwar fate of the Hmong. Throughout my management of the resistance program, I had worried about what would become of Vang Pao's people. Nevertheless, even as a skeptic about the durability of the US commitment to Laotian independence, I had not actively pursued the issue with either Vang Pao or my superiors—even after the conflict intensified in 1965. Neither Vang Pao nor I had followed up on the first exploration of possible refuge across the Mekong in Sayaboury Province, and no ambassador or chief of station had ever raised the issue with me; Ambassador Leonard Unger may have mentioned it once, in 1963 or 1964, but only tangentially, in a conversation about something else. CIA Headquarters was equally reticent, never suggesting, at least during my tenure, that serious contingency planning was needed.

In retrospect, I think that all of us, Hmong and American, shrank from the prospect of a defeat so final as to require full-scale emigration. Well after 1968, it was easy to defer serious study of a Hmong refuge because there were always so many uncertainties—especially regarding the outcome in South Vietnam, which would determine the fate of Laos.

Moreover, we always had to worry about Hmong morale. It was a concern when I first encouraged an expedition to Sayaboury in the first year of the program, and it became even more important as the Hmong paid with their blood to defend the hills around the Plain of Jars. Finally, with the fateful commitment of US troops in South Vietnam in 1965, the ability of the Hmong to divert North Vietnamese divisions from the southern battlefield became crucially important to US policymakers and military commanders. What we would have accomplished with more active attention to the emigration issue I cannot say, but the eventual outcome is a painful memory. My only compensation is the knowledge that many Hmong refugees have become American citizens and built successful lives since emigrating to the United States.



In 1968, after more than seven years in charge of the Laotian irregulars program, I decided enough was enough. Although I understood the policy imperatives driving the conversion of Lao irregulars into quasi-soldiers, the consequences, including the prospect of a growing drain on Hmong manpower, were making it hard to give my best to the program. Headquarters agreed to let me return to the states for my first tour there since I joined CIA in 1952.

As deputy chief of the Laos Task Force, I found myself heavily engaged in one of the least gratifying aspects of duty at Headquarters, personnel management. The task force was under fierce pressure to come up with people for assignment to Laos, mostly to the paramilitary program, and I accepted that my years of experience made me a reasonable choice to recruit and evaluate candidates for these positions. Routine personnel management—promotions, Headquarters assignments, and so forth—gave me little satisfaction, but I did my best to judge on their merits the competing recommendations for promotions and foreign assignments that crossed my desk.

The Clandestine Service was overstrength at this point, and I became involved in an exercise to identify for separation officers at the lower end of the performance rankings. Reviewing a list of such candidates, I found to my sorrow the name of Jack Shirley. True, Jack had never showed any interest in climbing the bureaucratic ladder and his individualism had prevented his earning the ultimate bureaucratic accolade of “team player.” I knew him well, however, and valued his courage, competence, and honesty.

I argued for Jack’s retention on the basis of his rare paramilitary skills, but, given the bureaucratic atmosphere of the time, I almost certainly would not have prevailed. What saved Jack was the simultaneous arrival of two pieces of paper on the desk of Tom Karamessines, chief of the Clandestine Service. One was the list of officers recommended for dismissal; the other was a request that Jack be decorated for a recent act of heroism during a training exercise in which he saved a colleague’s life at the risk of his own. Karamessines said he couldn’t fire anyone with that kind of courage and ordered Jack retained at least until his length of service qualified him for retirement.

It was not all personnel work, but two years of Headquarters duty was more than enough, and, in 1970, as the Laos program was about to expand to include Thai ground units, Chalern and I returned to Bangkok. Representing CIA, I helped negotiate with the Royal Thai Government the terms of this addition to the effort to meet the growing threat to Long Tieng and to support US operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex.

The negotiations were complicated and intense and, as expected, consumed most of my time. Nevertheless, my wide acquaintanceship throughout the Thai military and security services, a large part of my credentials for the job, made it inevitable that I would get involved in other matters.

One of these was the fight against the narcotics trade. Heroin consumption by US troops in Vietnam had reached epidemic proportions in the late 1960s, and drug use had become a problem even among American children attending the International School in Bangkok. The local office of the US Drug Enforcement Agency had the main responsibility for police work against the illegal drug market, but CIA had a mandate for intelligence collection on that target.

The biggest heroin operation in the notorious “Golden Triangle,” which straddled the border between Burma and northwest Thailand, was run by a Chinese named Lo Sing Han. Managing such an industrial-scale activity required massive communications support, and, in the effort to destroy it, the United States was monitoring his radio network. One day in 1971, as I recall, I learned that intercepts had revealed the itinerary of a planned move by Lo

Sing Han from one site in Burma to a new one. Between the two locales lay a salient of Thai territory. Previously undisturbed in his mountain lair, Lo Sing Han had had no reason to respect national boundaries, and the itinerary described his intended route across that sliver of Thailand. His route seemed to offer the opportunity to make a real dent in the heroin traffic, but I also saw in it a potential feather in PARU's cap.

I called Pranet, now a National Police general and still in command of PARU, to arrange a meeting. Excited at the prospect of landing a crippling blow on the traffickers who had been thumbing their noses at the Thai security agencies, he set to work planning a helicopter-borne operation. It worked to perfection: the PARU ambush party captured Lo Sing Han on Thai territory and brought him to Bangkok in handcuffs.

It was only then that I began to understand the limitations of an attack on illicit drugs at the supply end. For one thing, the Thai could not prosecute Lo Sing Han for activity conducted in Burma. Bangkok could only extradite him to Rangoon to face whatever action the Burmese chose to take. Meanwhile, the Golden Triangle continued to produce and ship huge quantities of illegal narcotics. The absence of Lo Sing Han, whether temporary or permanent, was quickly filled, and pretty soon we were back where we started.

In the early 1950s, while operating against the relatively small-scale traffickers in Chiang Mai Province, I had thought of our counternarcotics efforts as a real contribution toward reducing supply. With the explosion of the traffic into a multibillion-dollar international industry, however, that seemed no longer to be the case. I derived some consolation from the knowledge that my PARU connection could still lead to quick, decisive, tactical exploitation of intelligence, but the ultimate effect was doubtful at best.



By 1972, the steady growth of the Thai commitment to both Laos and—with regular RTA forces—Vietnam had fueled Thai students' opposition to the war. The growing unrest extended to American use of bases in Thailand, and it appeared to me that the government's unwillingness formally to declare war against North Vietnam had had the undesirable side effect of preventing it from explaining its main strategic aim—preventing the extension of Vietnamese power to the Thai border. Popular opposition eventually paralyzed the government, and students began throwing rocks at the US embassy. At the embassy and in Washington, people worried about the appearance of instability in Bangkok and the resulting threat to the US military presence in Thailand.

The ambassador and chief of station feared that violent repression of student protests would only inflame anti-American sentiment, but the ambassador hesitated to make a *démarche* because he knew that it would probably become public and harden student intransigence. The problem was how to communicate discreetly US concern and urge the government to find a bloodless way out. It fell to me to carry the message quietly to the top levels of government. I called a nephew of Deputy Prime Minister Praphat Charusathien, who was a longtime acquaintance, and told him that I needed urgently to see his uncle. He immediately collected me, and we drove to Praphat's residence, where senior military commanders were trying to formulate a response to the student crisis.

Praphat came out and greeted us warmly, and I proceeded to convey the embassy's anxiety about a violent reaction to the continuing unrest. His response was reassuring: "We aren't going to shoot any students, and American bases here are in no danger." Just how he proposed to avoid violence without giving in to student demands he did not say, but, when I conveyed his assurances to the ambassador and COS, they were relieved. It seems likely that he already had some inkling of the solution. In October, he and Prime Minister Thanom announced that they were stepping down. Well aware of the personalized nature of Thai politics, they recognized that their departure would at least temporarily defuse the issue of the war. Their resignations averted a violent confrontation with the protesters and, at the same time, preserved the government's freedom of action in Laos.

The resignations nevertheless left open an important question for the new government. Incoming Prime Minister Kukrit Pramote was a civilian and, as it happened, gay. His orientation had neither impeded his political career nor attracted much attention in a culture free of anxiety about sex. Kukrit understood the vulnerability of any civilian head of government to interference by the military in politics, however, and he feared the prestige that Thanom and Praphat still commanded in the military establishment. He thought that the solution was to prevent them from undercutting his authority by forcing them out of the country.

It was at this point that my friend Vitoon came to grief. I have already described how this intense, intelligent, and immensely hard-working army officer engineered the successful introduction of Thai volunteer troops into the war in Laos. Now, having risen to the rank of lieutenant general, he became involved in the machinations that preceded the resignations of Thanom and Praphat.

I think that, with good reason, Vitoon saw himself as having superior credentials to command the army. The choice of the next commander would be based at least as much on political as on professional considerations, however, and the successful contender for the job would have to persuade Kukrit of both his loyalty and his ability to control the officer corps.

Vitoon never told me how he learned of Kukrit's determination to exile his predecessor, but it is clear that he saw in it an opportunity to advance his claim to lead the army. If Kukrit were to get Thanom and Praphat to accept exile abroad, he would have to do so without provoking a mutiny. Vitoon thought that he could talk them into leaving and, at the same time, mollify the officer corps. He volunteered to serve as Kukrit's intermediary; the Prime Minister accepted his offer to try to get the deposed leadership out of the country.

The first part worked. As Kukrit's emissary, Vitoon persuaded Thanom and Praphat that resignation alone would not ensure a bloodless end to the unrest. They would have to accept exile. On 15 October 1973, the two left the country. Vitoon had underestimated the army's loyalty to them, however. His move provoked a mutiny—not against the prime minister, but against him—and the new leadership forced Kukrit to send Vitoon into exile. A face-saving formula allowed him to go to Tokyo, where he served as education attaché looking after Thai students in Japan, but it was the end of his military career.

I was not in Bangkok when Vitoon made his lonely way to Don Muang airport to leave for Tokyo. The only friendly face he saw was that of my wife, Chalern, who said goodbye to

him and his wife on behalf of both of us. The bright side was that, following conventional Thai practice, the new government kept him away only long enough to let things cool off, and, when Vitoon returned, he followed another Thai convention, one in which retired senior officials go into business.

Small courtesies like Chalern's farewell at the airport are not forgotten by people for whom a successful professional relationship is hardly possible without a personal friendship. The result in this instance was that Vitoon never forgot Chalern's gesture. Whenever I visited Bangkok, even 25 years later, the room he reserved for my use at his Trocadero Hotel was waiting for me.



While I worked in Bangkok on the logistics and administration of the Thai SGUs, the seasonal pendulum of combat in Laos swung back and forth three times as the situation in Vietnam deteriorated. Thai volunteer battalions bore the brunt of NVA assaults on the Long Tieng–Sam Thong complex and, despite their accelerated training and lack of previous combat experience, played a crucial role in saving Vang Pao's redoubt from capture.

On 21 February 1973, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma accepted the Agreement on the Restoration of Peace and Reconciliation in Laos that the United States had negotiated with Hanoi. American combat air support came to an end, but the North Vietnamese continued the buildup of their forces in the country. As the agreement was being signed, elements of a newly arrived NVA infantry division took Pakxong, the most important population center on the Bolovens Plateau, in southern Laos.

The most that Vang Pao could do in this new situation was try to prevent new North Vietnamese incursions into Hmong strongholds in Xieng Khouang Province. Unlike the Lao at Pakxong, his troops would fight. Nevertheless, with no combat air support, he could hold out only if Hanoi refrained from a major military campaign. Survival thus rested on the hope that the Vietnamese would prefer, at least for a while, not to display their contempt for the peace agreement.

The Hmong guerrilla army dissolved in May 1975, when the North Vietnamese capture of Saigon was followed by the collapse of the always shaky Laotian peace agreement concluded in 1973. Cher Pao Moua held out at Bouam Long, but, as Vang Pao and his family left Long Tieng, all other organized resistance to the North Vietnamese and their new puppet government came to an end.

Thus began the Hmong exodus from Laos. CIA flew some 12,000 combatants and their families from Long Tieng and Sam Thong to temporary refuge at Nam Phong in Northeast Thailand. Thousands more began the trek westward to the Mekong and, beyond it, across Sayaboury Province to the Thai border.

There followed an unseemly bureaucratic dance, with US agencies pointing at each other and the Thai waiting for an American lead that did not come. Headquarters ordered CIA in Bangkok to have nothing to do with refugee relief in Thailand, while the United States Operations Mission (USOM), the office of USAID in Thailand, claimed to be powerless to

help any of the thousands at Nam Phong. As Hmong misery deepened, so did my despair. Jerry Daniels, one of Vang Pao's last CIA contacts at Long Tieng, had gone along on the trek to Nam Phong, and his impassioned pleas for help could not be ignored.

Finally, I went to Sitthi (Sid) Savetsila, my brother-in-law and, at the time, chairman of the Thai National Security Council. "We have to do something," I pointed out, adding that we couldn't simply let the Hmong die of starvation and disease. Sid shared my distress and immediately set to work, using his very considerable powers of persuasion to rouse the Thai government from a lethargy similar to that in Washington.

Sid recognized that immediate repatriation was out of the question and that a fairly longterm refugee presence had to be accepted. On the other hand, permanent settlement was not in the cards. The Thai were too sensitive to ethnic minority problems to be willing to accommodate an entire new population. He therefore did as much as circumstances allowed—much more than anyone else. He approached Prime Minister Kukrit with an urgent request for land on which Hmong refugees could become self-sufficient. They would not take title to the land but would have the use of it while waiting for emigration to the United States.

Sid's powers of persuasion got results. Kukrit agreed to invest official funds to buy the land and also to press the Americans to help pay for housing and sanitary facilities. USOM finally undertook the relief effort on the American side, and conditions gradually improved. Meanwhile, the Royal Thai Government tried to encourage other Hmong to remain in Laos by providing some arms and ammunition. Only after years of agitation by Hmong leaders and their American counterparts did substantial emigration to the United States become possible and the construction of a new life begin. Even then, the cultural divide created trauma for some; many others adapted quickly and have achieved real success as US citizens.



When I retired from the Agency in 1977, I looked back on my career. Like that of any warrior, it featured both victories and defeats. The major campaign of the irregulars in Laos had ended in defeat for the United States and tragedy for many of the Hmong. Some of our Lao and other ethnic troops and their families had also suffered under a brutal and vengeful new regime. The Thai, at least, had achieved their minimum goal: the war in Laos had not spilled over into Northeast Thailand. On the other hand, their non-communist buffer against the Vietnamese had disappeared.

On a personal level, my departure featured a private audience with the king at which he presented me a decoration acknowledging my efforts to advance the joint interests of Thailand and the United States. My reaction was—and still is—that the effort was mutual, every step of the way.



