

The Selectively Reluctant Informant

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A wartime photo interpreter/interrogator closes a credibility gap.

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Let us begin with the moral of this anecdote. In debriefing an informant, no matter how good his credentials or how high the quality of the information he has provided, one must always take care lest he prove unreliable on some one point, possibly of little significance, for some obscure reason.

During World War 11 the British had a small military mission in Kunming, China. One of its functions was to serve as operational headquarters for a group of native Thai and Chinese agents, dispatching them on missions into Japanese-semioccupied Thailand and debriefing them on return. Because aerial photographs were helpful in these debriefings and all aerial photography of Thailand was done by the 14th USAAF, the British having none of their own, they often invited 14th Air Force to send a representative with photographs to participate in the questioning. I usually managed to serve as the 14th's representative myself: I enjoyed the hospitality of the British, whose supply of alcohol, locally made, was unlimited and superior in quality to any we could find.

(Also, though it is irrelevant to this story, I spoke Chinese. The British interrogators were generally on very bad terms with their agents. They debriefed in Thai, and since most of the agents spoke Chinese I conversed and commiserated with them :in that language, learning

much that they claimed not to have told their masters. I never passed any of this information, of value for targeting, on to our allies; we had the only weapons—aircraft—able to attack Thai targets. From the character of the questions the British asked one could only suppose them to have the delusion that one day Lord Mountbatten would stage a triumphal entry into Bangkok, a highly unlikely proposition.)

Prime Source

One day, about a year before the war ended, I received a phone call from the British mission asking me to drop by that afternoon with our large-scale aerial mosaic of Bangkok. The call came from an RAAF officer, one who had confided to me in private that he was the only gentleman in the mission; he had run a gambling house in Bangkok in civilian life. I inferred from his hints that he had in hand a source privy to much information that the Japanese considered highly classified.

On arrival I found that I had assessed his hints correctly. This was no ordinary agent he had, but a ranking officer of the Thai Air Force who had served as an ally of the Japanese. The colonel had left Bangkok a few weeks earlier, when he concluded that the Japanese had lost the war and he would do well to ingratiate himself with the winners. He had been practically hand-carried to Kunming by a British agent. He was a cultivated gentleman and spoke fluent English, so we had no language problem; as I recall he had taken at least a part of his advanced military training in Britain. By asking him to identify features on the Bangkok mosaic that we already knew about, I was able to test his veracity and knowledge of the military installations in and around the city. He was not accustomed to reading aerial photography, but he was a first-class source; after several years of wholehearted cooperation with the Japanese military he knew nearly as much about their Bangkok installations as they did.

I may as well admit at this point that the 14th Air Force never had any success against Bangkok targets. We could reach it only with our B-24s. We rarely had enough gasoline to send a group mission that distance, and when we did we preferred to use it against targets of a higher priority. Moreover, when we did attack Bangkok, it seemed the gremlins

inevitably intervened and we sprayed bombs all over the city without hitting any military targets. This debriefing of mine was therefore on the futile side, but I did it conscientiously, with professional thoroughness. It went as well as it could possibly have until, methodically covering the mosaic, we came to the southern suburbs and to a petroleum refinery there. When I asked the Thai its capacity and present output, he assured me that it was not in use and had never been occupied by the Japanese.

Blind Spot

These assertions, made in the blandest tone and with no change in the manner of his discourse, were belied by the photographs before us, which showed the plant's chimneys smoking, railway cars on its siding, and what looked to be a tanker at a buoy on the river nearby. It was obvious to the least skilled photo interpreter that our informant was prevaricating, and it seemed important to find out why. I refrained from comment on his statement and moved to another part of the mosaic, and then to another. After a bit, I asked him where the warehouses were that the Japanese used to store the industrial alcohol they collected up-country and moved thru Bangkok in quantities, mainly to power their motor vehicles. His response was quick and detailed, and he volunteered that these warehouses would make excellent targets for the 14th, the first such suggestion he had offered. So his fib about the refinery on the other side of town could not be laid to general pyrophobia.

When I had finished with my questions, I paused for a moment and then observed that I had never seen Bangkok from the ground. It looked to be a beautiful city. I intended to visit it as a tourist when the war was over. The colonel's response was what I had hoped—a hearty and sincere invitation to stay with him any time I came to the Thai capital. I thanked him deeply; and then, as casually as I could manage, I asked him what part of the city he lived in.

A slim, brown finger came forward and a well-polished nail touched the mosaic for a moment and slowly withdrew. I looked where it had rested. There was a park-like estate with extensive lawn and gardens and a

large mansion partially hidden in a grove of trees. It was so situated that the overs from any proper bomb run on the refinery would fall in his front garden if not on his front steps or the roof of his home.

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