

Historical Intelligence

Vignette

The Youngest Operative: A Tale of Initiative Behind Enemy

Lines During WW II

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

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

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

countryside, where they could live in relative safety until the situation improved.

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

When the Japanese appeared at the shop, they often brought with them POWs they used as drivers and mechanics. Most of the POWs were British, but there were also Dutch and Australians. From the start there was a communications problem. Neither the Japanese nor the POWs spoke much Thai, while the shop personnel spoke only Thai. Someone remembered that Orachun's father spoke English. He was a graduate of Prince Royal College, an American missionary school. His father was pressed to serve as an interpreter between the POWs and the shop mechanics. Every time his father was called next door to the repair shop, Orachun went along.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The water carrier had two cutoff gasoline cans suspended from the ends of a pole slung over his shoulder. When Orachun understood how the water carrier's job worked, he strolled into the second temple and placed

his little container near the well. There, it remained hidden but close to where the water carrier would have to pass. As the water carrier approached him, he made little signs to make sure the man would notice the container. The POW then casually filled just one of his cans with water, leaving the other empty for Orachun's container, which he slipped in. He carried his load out through the temple gate and back to the POW compound, right past the Japanese guards, who noticed nothing amiss.

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



Photo Courtesy of the author.

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

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

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

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

Orachun's last visit to the temples was the most interesting of all. The



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

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

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

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