

Thailand and Future Wars

It was ironic that, after West Point I was assigned to Hawaii's 25th Division which was organized Pentomically for readiness for either a European high tech conventional and/or nuclear war, while the war we were about to enter would be about as low tech - guerilla, terrorist, counterinsurgent , Asiatic - warfare as one could get.

So as soon as I joined the 27th Infantry Wolfhound Battle Group we were ordered to prepare for and participate in Operation Air Cobra to be held in Thailand. It was to be a SEATO (South East Asia Treaty Organization) exercise to better prepare for actual combat against Communist guerillas.

As luck would have it, the Commander of the 27th was about as prepared as anyone. Colonel William McKean was 43 when I joined his staff as a Plans and Operation Major. He had landed with the Normandy landing, was wounded four times before he was pulled back to England. He had won 2 Silver Stars by then. Most of his career has been with troops, with only interludes for military courses as he climbed the promotion ladder.

It was obvious to me soon after I joined the Wolfhounds that the men were devoted to him. He always took care of them. And his wife Louise made sure the young wives

Hawaii Years (4)

Category: Hawaii, New Zealand, Thailand Based Years

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Written by dave

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of the 1,000 soldiers in his command were taken care of also.

In my Wolfhound Uniform - with Crest on Jungle Cap



Operation Air Cobra

The Air Cobra Exercise involved 5,000 men. The 27th Infantry and US Special Forces component was joined by Air Force and other Units from the US, Britain, Thailand, Australia, and France.

It was designed to exercise rapid deployment and resupply of forces by air, including supplying Thai and US Special Forces deep into the jungle areas which surrounds Thailand, as they cope with Communist guerilla forces that threaten the Kingdom of Thailand as they already were penetrating into South Vietnam.

Part of the operation would get US and other Western military familiar with the country, its air bases such as Udorn, which would be key in any future operations, and give our troops a taste of operating in deep, cobra snake infested jungles - which would be the home of communist guerillas operating across borders.

I took my operations staff into one jungle area to encamp over night. We would try out hammocks designed to permit the soldiers to sleep up off the jungle floor.

A humorous incident involving me happened one night. I put up my mosquito equipped hammock and got into it within a deep jungle patch we marched to, using machetes to cut through vines. I had my loaded .45 Caliber service pistol on my chest as I slept on my back.

Somehow in my restless thrashing around after going to

sleep I managed to flip myself upside down so my face was looking at the jungle floor and its critters, my loaded pistol was trapped between my chest and the netting. I had a hell of a time getting out of the netting and had to put my bootless feet on the ground before I got properly back into the hammock. The NCOs in their hammocks nearby heard me cursing and using my flashlight attempting to get out, and they started laughing as their Major 'leader' was screwed up in his hammock - being fair game for either King Cobras or Guerillas.

I doubted that I would want to bivouac near enemy guerilla country sleeping in vulnerable hammocks 3 feet off the ground, cobras or not.

Took me a few days to live that one down. I got back a bit by taking my section on a short forced march in the heat to see how we handled water discipline and the malaria pill distribution.

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Our key personnel were flown into one of the most dangerous but interesting corners of Thailand - Chiang Mai - in the northwest corner of the country bordering on Burma, Laos, Thailand and China. Close to the largest jungle based drug trade AND lawless wilderness.

It was also a place famed for its Silversmithing. So I was

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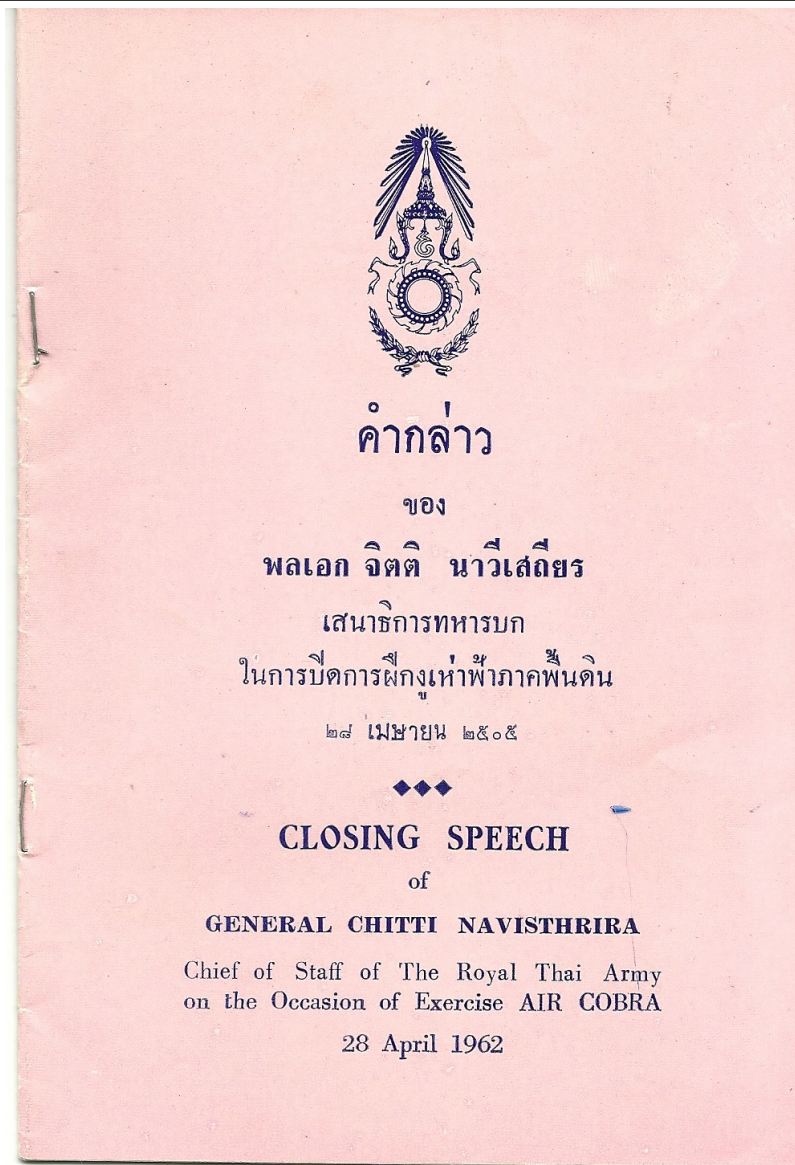
able, hastily, to buy and bring back a beautiful beaten-silver Buddhist Monk Begging Bowl. It is a prized possession in our China Cabinet.



Lessons Learned

As the exercise came to an end. the Thai Army Chief of Staff made a final speech about the lessons learned. He pulled no punches on its shortcomings.

Here is the cover of his multi-lingual printed farewell speech.



And he issued a joint Thai-US Commander's letter to the troops about the exercise and with one line I like '...whereas no war is complete without a celebration ----' I.e. he was signaling we should have a party.

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He also distributed individual 'award' certificates to our key officers, including this one for me. (you click your mouse over the image below it will expand)



I learned several things from that brief excursion into Thailand.

That Kingdom seems to be a very cohesive society - I can't see that Communists could make very deep inroads into its political culture. While there certainly are poor rural peoples, and very remote jungle areas, the majority of the people, particularly in the dense urban cities seem coalesced around some unique core values - the most dominant of which is their pervasive Buddhism followed by their reverence and loyalty to their King - who is no dictator.

It is a very pretty country with its ancient temples, peaked images, colorful and ubiquitous monks, with their begging bowls. Their visible culture - long called Siam - is really well rendered in the Broadway play "The King and I."

I saw just enough that I wanted to come back, and at least visit Bangkok again. If only to pick up artifacts like Tomb Rubbings, carved ivory and metal images, for Patsy's and my home.

I did so, during my 5 days R&R during the Vietnam War I was headed into, sooner or later.

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While I was still in Thailand, waiting for our air transportation back to Hawaii, I wrote a long piece for the general public about "The Battle Before the War Begins" in which I accurately portrayed what was going to happen in Thailand - a communist Insurgency - which was already heating up in South Vietnam.

In it there I spelled out the kind of pre-emptive efforts in the Thai 'countryside' - amounting to the same kind of

'counterinsurgency' efforts that the Thai government - supported by the US that was not sufficiently done in Vietnam, whose 'war' is already going on.

It also detailed the necessary strategy that it will take to defeat insurgencies - actions to win hearts and minds - 40 years before just such a strategy had to be used effectively to put down the Insurgency in Iraq after our conventional troops got there in 2003.

It was a long piece, printed full text in the Denver Post and other publications June 10th, 1962.

Departing Hawaii

Almost as soon as I got back to Oahu, it was time to pack up and head for the Mainland, get to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where Army wisdom said I needed to attend the Army's Command and Staff College for a year, and NOT be permitted to stay on the lovely Hawaiian beaches for a 4th year. Which, if I had not been considered an Army 'comer' - potential hot shot - I would have been able to take advantage of. And loll about the beaches.

Cest la Guerre