

## Thailand 1: Some Recollections

By way of introduction to this brief series of recollections of 1961-63, we all have Bob Textor, among others, to thank for selecting our group and for providing us with a thorough grounding in Thai language. I remember (or it seems like) we had 30 hours/week of language classes for the three months of training, plus Thai history, geography and culture. Group 1 ended up with about 43 volunteers going to Thailand – in community development, TESL (or was it TEFL?), university/elementary/secondary teaching, and malaria eradication. (Note: I expect to stand corrected about the information provided in this brief piece as time plays strange tricks with one's memory; so I encourage others in Thailand 1 to add their comments.)

Dr. Robert Textor, who headed up the training program for Thailand 1, has retired from teaching (last at Stanford) and has settled in Portland, OR. Re-establishing a relationship with Bob Textor has been a most enjoyable series of events; and we often discuss the early beginnings of Peace Corps Thailand. And we have also had a visit from another Thailand 1 volunteer, Emilie Ketudat and her husband, Dr. Sippanondha Ketudat, and their children and grandchildren.

Like every volunteer, each person decides why the Peace Corps is the right choice for him or her. For those of us in Thailand 1, there wasn't any prior volunteer experience to build on and clearly we were guinea pigs in the era of "The Ugly American" which, incidentally, was set in Thailand (or at least had Thai nationals playing roles in the film). Also we were the pre-Vietnam War group, and I am sure the Vietnam War era PCVs had a much more difficult time than we had.

In my case, I was engaged in post-graduate studies in London when John F. Kennedy, recently elected President, announced the beginnings of the Peace Corps in the Spring of 1961. I remember sending an aerogramme to Sargent Shriver, Peace Corps, Washington DC. I think I got back some type of application form, completed it, and sent it in. After I arrived home in August 1961, I received a postcard inviting me to come to the University of Michigan for three months of training, and to go to Thailand in January as a university instructor in town planning. Needless to say, my parents were not too overjoyed – I believe they would have much rather seen me settle down – finally.

The training program was thorough – and it was clear that we were guinea pigs, as Textor and company pulled out all stops to be sure we were ready to go. We left Michigan in January with sub-freezing weather, flew from Detroit to San Francisco, where it was slightly warmer. Then on to Hawaii, Wake Island, Tokyo, Hong Kong and finally, Bangkok via Pan Am 1. My memory is that we arrived in Bangkok late at night and it felt like it was about 80 degrees and 80% plus humidity. (About two or three weeks later we realized it was "winter" in Thailand and we actually were wearing heavier clothes as our bodies adjusted to the climate.)

After welcoming speeches and events in Bangkok, we were sent to Chachoengsao where we stayed, I believe, at a teacher training center. The idea was for us to make the

transition into life in Thailand with additional language training and acculturation. It was a great idea - at Chachoengsao we learned that Thais are not always quiet, respectful, and peaceful. A community celebration was underway with parades, bands, Thai boxing, Chinese opera, shadow puppets, and lots of food and drink, and loudspeakers that seemed to blare out well into the night. We also were served Thai food, and I could not get enough of it. However, after about three or four days my tongue and the roof of my mouth were so affected by the hot peppers that it was all I could do to drink water, and I went on a plain rice, bland food, and fruit diet until things got back to normal. Thus I learned the importance of mixing spicy and non-spicy dishes.

Teaching at Chulalongkorn was a challenge. First because I had never taught before, but also because there were very few up to date materials available – so I sent a request to the professional associations in the U.S. and books, journals and other materials began to arrive. In addition to teaching, I was involved in curriculum development, and in providing seminars for practicing planners with the City of Bangkok and the national government. During the school vacation, I participated in a manpower study being conducted by the Rand Institute, several of us helped get a YMCA camp ready for the season. I also made contact with a USOM planner from Oregon, Cy Nims, who was working on national planning legislation and a plan for Khon Kaen, designated as a major regional center; and I assisted Cy in some of his work.

I also have memories of several visits by U.S. Congressmen (no or very few women representatives then), mostly Republicans, checking up on us and looking for ways to embarrass the Kennedy administration by hoping we would screw up. Mostly, I think they were on junkets and they seemed to spend more time shopping, sightseeing, etc. than checking us out. But those of us in Bangkok were the subjects of these visits much more than those who were up-country.

And we traveled. Three of us (Jim Shannon and Bob Cumming) took a trip to Cambodia, via Singapore as Thailand and Cambodia were not on speaking terms and one could not travel by air or train directly from Thailand to Cambodia. On our return I remember we crossed the Thai-Cambodian border on foot. We walked across a bridge that had been shelled, UN helicopters were overhead, and Cambodian soldiers were on buildings behind sandbags (behind us).

I shudder to think of the tragedy that occurred in Cambodia and the horrors faced by the people, some of whom we may have met during our brief visit. U.S. understanding of the internal politics of Indochina, and our subsequent policies and relationships, left much to be desired, and there is no doubt in my mind that we contributed to the turmoil in both Vietnam and Cambodia.

I remember the early contingents of U.S. military arriving in Bangkok and Thailand – the advance group had some language and cultural training. But that changed very quickly as Bangkok became the R&R capital for the GI buildup in SE Asia, and in Bangkok the prices of samlaws and taxis went sky high. The “Friendship Highway”, an oxymoron if ever I saw one, built with U.S. aid, became the main route for the movement of military

equipment from the Gulf to the inland northeast. The plan for Khon Kaen as a regional medical and educational center lost ground to a large U.S. Air Force base from which planes traveled into Indochina for bombing runs

Like many others, my Peace Corps experience was unique and rewarding. I have not been back to Thailand, but not for lack of trying. A mid-1970s Fulbright teaching scholarship disappeared, as a result of a peaceful; “coup d’etat” in Bangkok, and then other things got in the way.

Recently, I met an American planner who had visited and lectured at Chulalongkorn University. He commented that the curriculum seemed adequate, but somewhat dated. Perhaps it’s time for an update!