

MACV Army "A" Photo Team Travels To Thailand

SUBJECT: King Of Thailand briefed on SEATO Exercise Ramasoon  
Construction of Thai Black Panther Div Site At Bridge  
Of River Kwaie (Kwai)  
Mitropob Fair

The five MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam) photo teams rotated to Bangkok, Thailand, on a basis of one week a month, beginning in the fall of 1967. Unfortunately, the Army "A" team, that I headed, had camera problems as described in the 9th Infantry Division Adoption Story (Available at this website), which prohibited my team from partaking in the Thailand adventure for several months. By late February, our team had its travel orders typed on DA Form 662, with appropriate signatures and fund citation. The team was booked on a Continental contract flight. The team was lounging in the office, at room #200 of the Brinks Hotel (BOQ), when a lieutenant walked in; announcing he was Lt. Bruce Wesson, the teams new OIC (Officer In Charge).

Panic set in before Lt. Wesson asked what the team's next assignment was. When I told him Bangkok, his expression was of disbelief. I had Nash and Molinda drive the lieutenant to the Saigon Housing Office, to get him a room in some BOQ around town, and drop off his bags. The reason for the consternation, was it took nearly a week to get our travel documents finalized. Now we had only a few working hours to duplicate the feat for the lieutenant I wasn't sure we hadn't bitten off more than we could chew, as the axiom relates. While the team took the lieutenant around securing him a living place, I got a copy of his orders transferring him from the 221st Signal Company to the MACV Photo Team. Those orders had all the data needed to type up a set of DA Form 662 travel orders for the lieutenant to fly to Bangkok.

The 662 Form was basically a fill in the blank form, such as name, rank and serial number, security clearance. Travel from and to, with CIPAP, an abbreviation to travel all over Thailand, not restricting him to Bangkok solely. Date of travel and duration. In the special instructions sections was the most complicated. Listing 66 Lbs personal baggage and 200 Lbs of camera equipment. Plus it contained a clause stating: carrying firearms, bombs, fuses, signal kits, ammo, explosives, incendiary devices, munitions, grenades etc, etc on military aircraft were prohibited. It also listed the next of kin and address of everyone on the orders. The bottom of the form had agency approval, administrative approval, fiscal approval, by the comptroller, with funding allocation and order number. If our flight was filled, it was feared, we'd have to cancel for a later date, when the entire team could travel together.

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The DA Form 662 was a five copy, four carbon paper set. Any typing mistake required the eraser of all five mistakes, not just the top copy. Then re-align the form exactly back in the typewriter. Extra copies were Xeroxed, because five copies simply weren't sufficient. The Air Force wanted several copies of the travel orders for each flight booked. You left a copy, when signing out of the home base to travel. Finance required several copies of the orders, to receive an advance travel pay, Then again upon return to process the travel voucher. The housing office in Bangkok, needed several copies to issue a statement of non-availability, for us to stay in a civilian hotel. The minimum a person could get by with was about 15 copies of the orders. Then too, the fourth and fifth carbon copy was so blurred, that they were hardly readable, as enclosed sample shows, where the team travelled to Nha Trang, staying at the Nha Trang MACV Press Camp.

Once the team returned from the housing office, and securing the lieutenant a room, it was a hectic dash across town to MACV HQS, to introduce the lieutenant to the bosses at MACVIO, and hand-carry the orders to personnel and comptroller's office, for proper signatures and other data. I don't remember, but MACV, may have called flight reservations, getting the lieutenant on the same flight, as the rest of the team. With some hocus-pocus magic string of luck, every key person or alternate with authority to sign orders were at their desk. Incredibly, within 90 minutes the lieutenant's orders were signed, sealed and notarized, with extra copies made. Plus booked on the same flight, as the rest of the team. Incredibly fast mind-boggling results.

The next day was final packing, undoubtedly, we took Lt. Wesson by Army Finance to get an advance travel pay. I recall stopping by the CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support), to check if they had any projects in Thailand. I was informed, they were involved with building a new base for the Thai Army's Black Panther Division. At least we had a lead on a potential story to film, and not just rest and recuperation. On the 1st of March, 1968, the team departed Saigon for 16 days in Bangkok. The Navy, Marine, Air Force and Army "B" Teams spent one week in Thailand, exactly how we managed to eke out 16 days, raises a myriad of questions?

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Once our travel plans were confirmed, I stopped by the Saigon Dept. Of The Army Special Photo Office (DASPO) villa, to verify the hotel name and address, their team was working out of in Bangkok. At the Bangkok Airport, I showed the slip of paper with the address of 4 Soy Nana Toy, Such Com Vich. Definitely not Thai spelling, but close to English pronunciation, to two taxi drivers. One driver knew the location. Loading the equipment and team members into the cabs, we were at the hotel in 15-20 minutes. The hotel was air conditioned, had a 24 hour cafe, barber shop and bar, with a color TV in the lobby. This was a far cry from anything in Saigon. Without reservations we were checked in with no problem.

The U.S. Army's role in the war efforts from Thailand were very limited. With technical advisors to the Thai Army, and operating the Port of Sattahip, (described in Worst Film In Vietnam available at this website.) was the principle activities. To my knowledge, my Ex-unit DASPO was the only Army photographers in country. With the arrival of the four man MACV photo team virtually doubled the Army photographer in Thailand. Although we were all army cameramen, our purposes were radically different. DASPO motives were to supply the Pentagon brass with pictorial documentation of Army activities and support the National Archives with film. The MACV Photo Team's objectives were nation building and pacification efforts, to augment stateside network television.

Still we had mutual requirements. Both team filming missions were coordinated through MAC-Thai's Information Office. The MACV team had never been to Thailand, we could share a taxi or military vehicle to get to MAC-Thai Headquarters. We could share equipment or pointers on getting a Statement Of Non-Availabilty, to stay at the hotel. During our stay in Bangkok, we never jointly had filming assignments.

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The next morning we did share a ride to MAC-Thai HQS. Along the way we passed SEATO Headquarters, as attached slides show. The Southeast Asia Tread Organization, of which the United States, is a member nation, we discovered was have a multi-nation military training exercise, called Ramasoon, scheduled for the next several weeks. The SEATO war game probably contributed to our team's extend stay in Bangkok.

Upon arriving at MAC-Thai HQS, the place was in turmoil and utter confusion. Overnight, some insurgents had ambushed an American vehicle, somewhere in the boon-docks of Thailand, killing two American service members. What branch of service I don't recall. It seemed nobody at MAC-Thai knew how to handle the situation. I remember thinking, back in Saigon, MACV handles two fatalities an hour, with everything being calm and serene. But for MAC-Thai having deaths to deal with was almost an unheard of event. The information Office was trying to get out press releases of the event, thus we took a back seat to more pressing urgencies. What should have taken 15 minutes, took well over an hour to accomplish. MAC-Thai routinely handled MIAs of pilots that failed to return from missions over North Vietnam and Laos, but these were handled in a different manner.

Our first assignment on the 4th of March, was the Bangkok public opening ceremony for the SEATO Exercise Ramasoon, with Prime Minister, Field Marshal Thanon Kittikachorn providing the keynote statement. This was the second time I had filmed the Prime Minister, for he headed the Thailand delegation to the Manila Conference in 1966. (Story and press packets of the Manila Conference at this website.) See attached sound and motion picture captions of opening ceremony exhibit (C)

The command center for Ramasoon was at Koret Air Force Base, about 100 miles North of Bangkok. MAC-Thai scheduled a vehicle to carry the team, from the hotel to Bangkok's Airport, and provided a flight to Koret AFB. If I recall, the MACV Photo Team stayed at the base guest house for the several day duration.

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When it came to meal time, the military had three possible choices, the mess hall, chow hall, slop shoot, among other names, the P.X. Snack bar and the NCO or Officer Clubs. For years the health and vitality of the various military branches Officer and NCO Clubs systems were vastly diverse. On a subsequent visit to Thailand, I found out why the Air Force club system was ranked superior. Around Saigon, there was seldom anything but disparaging talk of the Army NCO club. On Tan Son Nhut AFB and Army operated NCO Clubs in downtown Saigon, everyone headed to the Air Force clubs instead. Even the VNAF Club, operated by the Vietnamese Air Force at Tan Son Nhut was preferred. I never heard a begrudging comment from American troops, who ventured to the VNAF Club. Everyone proclaimed or expounded the virtues of having a fantastic evening at the VNAF Club. The Army's club system was constrained with less than stellar performance, in part by the Khaki Mafia. A published book by that title, details how Army top club officials, including the first Sergeant Major Of The Army embezzled millions in club profits, forcing the Army to do-away with over seas slot machines.

The Army welcomed everyone to eat in the Army mess halls. In fact, they encouraged officers and NCOs to eat there. When complaints arose concerning the quality of the food, the higher ranking personnel had first hand knowledge as to the food's condition. While in Thailand, I was refused entry into the Air Force chow hall, because of my rank. I was informed, that all NCOs were required to eat their meals at the NCO club. Granted the Army's roast beef was always over-cooked and dry, never cooked medium and moist, which led to many grievances and dis-satisfied troops. I never found the airbase NCO club, instead I located an open air Thai cafe, and settled for a bowl of fried rice.

The king was scheduled to receive a classified briefing on the SEATO Exercise Ramasoon, around mid-morning at the command center on Koret AFB. A series of anomalies transpired, before the King's plane landed. The MACV Photo Team was at the command center roughly two hours premature. The first oddity was that a score of civilian Thailand press corp showed up. Beside the closed door briefing, the king was shown some equipment used in Exercise Ramasoon, as the three slides exhibit "D" depicts.

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Another erratic event, was that the Air Force Air Police, gave a stern list of "DON'Ts" while filming the king. The list included: DON'T walk in front of the king. DON'T impede his movements. DON'T talk to him. DON'T use any height advantage, such as climb on a jeep's bumper to film down on the king. We were warned, that the Thai people respect their king and look up to him. Continuing, the APs stated, if we violated any DON'T, we would be arrested and turned over to the Thai authorities for belittling the king's image. I have vivid recollection, the briefing building had two steps. I pondered filming from inside the doorway as the king climbed the steps, or film from outside and let the king climb the steps, so as to not look down on the king. I felt it behooved me, to stand on the ground outside, eliminating any chance of insulting the King of Thailand's integrity

Another strange occurrence associated with the king's SEATO briefing, was the conference was classified, which excluded the Thai press corp from attending. SEATO HQS had its staffing personnel, but relied on the member nations for manpower, materials and equipment, in conducting the training sessions. As seen in the captions, from the opening ceremony, a general Black led the Australian contingency. New Zealand was also well represented. The United States played a key role, as did other participating countries. All these troops had travel orders, just as we had ours. As aforementioned, the DA Form 662 clearly stated everyones security clearance. Yet an American Naval officer officiating the king's briefing, blatantly exclaimed "I know you all have Top Secret clearances." The officer was so sure we had the proper clearances, that I didn't have the guts to tell him I only possessed a Secret clearance. I was appalled at the apathy and absense of scrutinizing those attending the king's briefing. No one asked for ID cards, orders or other documentation to check nationality or clearances. In retrospect, though I typed up Lt. Wesson's travel orders, I have serious reservations, he held a Top Secret Clearance either. I believe, we conversed over the dilemma, before the king arrived, but opted to shut-up!!!

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As the entourage of vehicles bringing the king from his plane to the briefing site arrived, Lt. Wesson instructed SP4 Molenda to be sure to film the king's exit from the building. I filmed His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej entering the briefing room. Lt. Wesson and I went in, before the door closed. I remember there was one still photographer present, certainly assigned to the base photo lab. If there was a second still photographer, he may have been from SEATO HQS or the king's personal photographer. The king had the only chair, everyone else stood. The briefing was conducted in English. The only thing I remember being said was friendly and opposing forces. I recall filming the two people presenting the briefing, the charts and the king. I felt uneasy standing looking down on the seated king, but there wasn't any Thai or APs in the briefing room. The king was engrossed in the conversation, asking numerous questions, that he may have over looked the situation, or failed to notice my filming him from overhead. The briefing was concluded in less than 15 minutes

I knew no more after the briefing, than before it began. I didn't know if the entire exercise was confined to Koret AFB, or encroached into the surrounding communities. Decades later, as I read the notes and documents prepared at the time, I realize Ramasoon was a nation wide communication exercise. Ramasoon had nothing to do with armor, infantry and artillery, but rather a combat support exercise. This was a testimony to what I learned of this Top Secret briefing! Absolutely nothing, I was busy with the F-Stop, focus and winding the spring drive motor of the camera to listen.

Outside we saw the king giving an impromptu press conference. Sp4 Nash, the soundman was taping the conference in Thai or Siamese language, but Sp4 Molenda was no where in sight. Lt. Wesson and I were outraged, that he wasn't filming the press conference. I ran to the group and began filming, while Lt. Wesson searched for Sp4 Molenda. He was found in the shade reading a comic book or novel. He explained, when the door opened, he filmed the king's exit, as instructed, but quit as the news briefing began.