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Military Histories



Thailand's Secret War

OSS, SOE, and the Free
Thai Underground
During World War II

E. Bruce Reynolds

Thailand's Secret War

This book is an absorbing account of secret operations and political intrigue in wartime Thailand. During World War II, Free Thai organizations cooperated with Allied intelligence agencies in an effort to rescue their nation from the consequences of its 1941 alliance with Japan. They largely succeeded despite internal differences and the conflicting interests and policies of their would-be allies, China, Great Britain, and the United States. London's determination to punish Thailand placed the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) at a serious disadvantage in its rivalry with the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS). The US State Department, in contrast, strongly supported OSS operations in Thailand, viewing them as a vehicle for promoting American political and economic influence in mainland Southeast Asia. Declassification of the records of the OSS and the SOE now permits full revelation of this complex story of heroic action and political intrigue.

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Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>List of maps</i>	xiv
<i>Preface</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii
<i>Notes on names and transliteration</i>	xix
Prologue	1
1 The origins of the Free Thai movement	9
2 The China tangle	47
3 Chamkat and the Allies	82
4 Showdown in Friendship Valley	117
5 Frustrated hopes	158
6 Contact at last	196
7 The OSS commits to Pridi	253
8 Pridi's bid for national redemption	287
9 Arming and training the underground	332
10 The end game	369
Epilogue	430
<i>Bibliography</i>	441
<i>Index</i>	455

Illustrations

1. M. R. Seni Pramot (Pramoj) (1905–1997), Thai minister to the United States 1940–1945, who founded and led the Free Thai movement abroad and became prime minister of Thailand in September 1945. (Source: US National Archives) page 10
2. Members of the first group of Thai volunteers pose with friends on the grounds of the Thai Legation after receiving their commissions as Free Thai officers in December 1942. Left to right: Chup Chintakanon, wife of the Legation's third secretary; Somphong Salyaphong (Somphonse Salyabongse); Ian Khampanon (Khambanonda); Chamrat Follett (in rear); Chok na Ranong; Sawat Chieosakun (Savasti Cheo-sakul) (in front); Chintamai Amatayakun (Chintamaye Amatayakul); M. L. Khap Kunchon (Kharb Kunjara), military attaché; M. L. Inthira Intharathut (Minister Seni's niece); Nitthiphat Chalichan (Nithipatna Jalichandra); Pao Khamurai (Pow Khamourai); Phisut Suthat (Pisoot Sudasna); Karawek Siwichan (Srivicharn); Phon Intharathat (Indradat); Anan Chintakanon, Legation third secretary; Thiap Kunchon (Kunjara), wife of the military attaché. (Source: courtesy of Pisoot Sudasna) 38
3. Pridi Phanomyong (Banomyong) (1900–1983), former cabinet minister, regent, and future prime minister, who headed the Free Thai underground inside Thailand. (Source: US National Archives) 83
4. A group of Thai officers of British Force 136, the Asian branch of the Special Operations Executive (SOE). Front row (left to right): Thep (Deb) Semthiti; Praphrit na Nakhon (Praprit na Nagara); Arun Sorathet (Aroon Sorathesn); Pat Pathamasathan (Padama Patmastana); Samran Wannaphrik (Varnabriksha); Bunsong Phungsunthon (Boonsong Phungsoondara). Back row

- (left to right): Prince Chridanai Kitiyakon (Kitiyakara), Krit Tosayanon (Kris Tosayanonda), Chunkeng Rinthakun (Chungkeng Rinthakul), Thana Posayanon (Poshyananda), and Prince Phisadet Rachani (Bhisadej Rajni). (Source: courtesy of Pisoot Sudasna) 97
5. Free Thai officers on the trail in Yunnan province in China in 1944. Left to right: Bunyen Sasirat (Sasiratna), Wichian Waiwanon (Vichien Vaivananda); Sawat Chieosakun (Savasti Cheo-sakul) (front), Phisut Suthat (Pisoot Sudasna), M. L. Khap Khunchon (Kharb Kunjara), two unidentified Chinese, and Pao Khamurai (Pow Khamourai). (Source: courtesy of Pisoot Sudasna) 180
6. Disguised as itinerant traders, the four-man team led by Pao Khamurai (Pow Khamourai) prepare to leave southern China on an overland journey to Thailand on 23 May 1944. Left to right: Chinese groom, Lieutenant Leo Karwaski, Pao, Phisut Suthat (Pisoot Sudasna) behind Pao, Major Nicol Smith, Sawat Chieosakun (Savasti Cheosakul), and Bunyen Sasirat (Sasiratna). (Source: courtesy of Pisoot Sudasna) 182
7. Members of the Free Thai training for the OSS DURIAN operation pose at Trincomalee, Ceylon with their trainers and advisors. Left to right: Anond Siwattana (Srivardhana), Bunmak Thesabut (Bunmag Desaputra), Sanguan Tularak, Herman Scholtz, John Wester, Wimon Wiriyawit, and Al Boehl. (Source: US National Archives) 222
8. Colonel Richard P. Heppner who commanded OSS Detachment 404 in Kandy Ceylon before transferring to head Detachment 202 in China in late 1944. (Source: courtesy of Elizabeth McIntosh) 236
9. Operating his radio from the second floor of this Bangkok house, Pao Khamurai (Pow Khamourai) made the first successful contact with the OSS base at Ssumao, China on 5 October 1944. (Source: photo by author) 251
10. This Thai Customs Service launch, captained by Sin Uthasi and pictured here on the Chao Phraya River, did yeoman's service in shuttling Free Thai infiltrators back and forth from the Gulf of Thailand to Bangkok. (Source: US National Archives) 276
11. This house, owned by Chan Bunnak (Charn Bunnag) and located across from Vajirvudh College, served as a secret radio station and sheltered OSS officers John Wester and

- Richard Greenlee when they arrived in Bangkok in January 1945. (Source: US National Archives) 295
12. Smoke billows from the Allied bombing of Bangkok's Samsen power plant on 14 April 1945. OSS officers took the photo from the riverside balcony of SIREN headquarters, Maliwan Palace. (Source: US National Archives) 306
13. A journalist in civilian life, Edmond Taylor served as the chief American representative on P Division before becoming Detachment 404 Intelligence Officer in 1945. (Source: US National Archives) 312
14. Colonel John Coughlin, commander of OSS Detachment 404 (left) and General Raymond B. Wheeler commander of the American India-Burma Theater (center) confer with Detachment 404 Operations Office Carleton B. Scofield at Kandy, Ceylon. (Source: US National Archives) 317
15. Members of the Royal Thai Air Force help push a C-47 onto solid ground at Phu Khieo airfield on 14 June 1945. (Source: US National Archives) 346
16. The view of Bangkok from the open hatch of a B-24 above the Chao Phraya River on 18 June 1945 during the Office of War Information (OWI)-sponsored drop of medical supplies. (Source: US National Archives) 347
17. The Supreme Allied Commander of the Southeast Asian Theater, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, chats with Cora DuBois, head of the OSS Detachment 404 Research and Analysis Branch at Kandy, Ceylon. Colonel John Coughlin, the Detachment 404 commander, looks on. (Source: US National Archives) 351
18. General William J. Donovan, commander of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) (right) decorates Major John J. Gildee at Kandy, Ceylon in early August 1945. The Free Thai underground rescued Gildee and others after the Japanese shot down the B-24 carrying his YIELD operational party on 29 May 1945. (Source: US National Archives) 365
19. Tiang Sirikhan (front, right) organized the largest Free Thai guerrilla training operation near his hometown of Sakon Nakhon in northeastern Thailand with support from British Force 136. Major David Smiley sits next to Tiang. In the back row, left to right, are Sergeant "Gunner" Collins, Captain Krit Tosayanon (Kris Tosayanonda); Major

- Rowland Winn, and Sergeant "Spider" Lawson.
(Source: courtesy of Pisoot Sudasna) 377
20. The two key figures in the Thai underground, Regent Pridi
Phanomyong and Police General Luang Adun
Adundetcharat toast with an American officer in the *sala*
behind Pridi's official residence in September 1945.
(Source: US National Archives) 401
21. Thai troops march past Bangkok's Democracy Monument
during the Free Thai "Victory Parade" of 25 September
1945. (Source: US National Archives) 409

Maps

- | | |
|--|----------------|
| 1. Thailand: target of two Allied Theaters | <i>page 44</i> |
| 2. Southern China to Northern Thailand | 164 |
| 3. Underground-related locations in Thailand | 210 |

Preface

When the Japanese attacked Great Britain and the USA in December 1941, they planned to use independent Thailand as the main launching pad for their invasions of British Malaya and Burma. They expected cooperation from the ambitious and increasingly dictatorial Thai Premier, Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram, whom they had helped gain territory from French Indochina after a brief border war earlier in the year. After brief initial Thai resistance, Phibun agreed to free passage for the Japanese forces, then within days agreed to an alliance that made Thailand Japan's first true Asian ally. British and American residents were interned and their properties confiscated. In January 1942, Phibun declared war on Great Britain and the USA, in May he sent his troops into the British Shan States, and in 1943 he accepted territory in the Shan territories and four states in northern Malaya proffered by the Japanese to ensure his continued support. Thailand had become a critical supply base for Japanese operations in Burma.

When the tide of war turned against the Axis Powers, Thailand found itself in difficult straits. Unless a way could be found to escape the embrace of Japan, Thailand would go down in flames, too; perhaps even lose its treasured independence. Phibun's chief civilian political rival, Pridi Phanomyong, sought to salvage the nation's position and gain the political upper hand by secretly seeking Allied support for a government-in-exile and an anti-Japanese underground. By this time, the Thai minister in Washington, Seni Pramot (Pramoj), had initiated Free Thai movements there and in London, and each of the Allied states had recruited Thai volunteers it hoped to infiltrate into the country.

My previous book, *Thailand and Japan's Southern Advance*, focused on the relationship between Thailand and Japan before and during World War II; this volume examines Thailand's secret war, this surreptitious campaign to win the favor of the Allies. Factional and personal differences among the Thai, the divergent interests of the nations opposing Japan, and often bitter rivalries between ambitious Allied intelligence agencies complicated this effort, creating what British Special Operations

Executive (SOE) Asian Chief Colin Mackenzie aptly described as a “very tangled skein.”

American and British policies toward Thailand remained out of sync throughout the war, sparking a particularly intense rivalry between the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the British SOE. With strong backing from the State Department, the OSS sought by hook or by crook to thwart perceived British schemes to “colonize” Thailand.

In the end, Thailand’s secret war proved to be a nearly bloodless affair and Pridi, with American support, succeeded in saving Thailand from the worst consequences of Phibun’s alliance with Japan. Problems left over from the war and long-simmering political jealousies, however, would ultimately destroy his effort to establish a stable and more democratic postwar political order.

The declassification of reams of OSS and SOE documents have made it possible for the first time to explore fully the complexities of Thailand’s wartime relations with Allied intelligence agencies.