EVERY MAN TRULY LIVES ALONE

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Thailand
International boundary
National capital
Railroad
Road
0 50 100 150 Kilometers
0 50 100 150 Miles
Boundary representation is not necessarily authoritative. Names in Vietnam are shown without diacritical marks.
BURMA
LAOS
VIETNAM
CAMBODIA
MALAYSIA
Andaman Sea
Gulf of Thailand
Gulf of Tonkin
South China Sea
Strait of Malacca
MERGUI ARCHIPELAGO
Hanoi
Ninh Binh
Thanh Hoa
Vinh
Ha Tinh
Dong Hoi
Hue
Rangoon
Moulmein
Tavoy
Mergui
Kawthaung
Loi-kaw
Vientiane
Nong Khai
Udon Thani (Udorn)
Khon Kaen
Kalasin
Sakon Nakhon
Nakhon Phanom
Roi Et
Khemmarat
Ubon Ratchathani
Warin Chamrap
Buriram
Surin
Sisaket
Kantheralak
Nakhon Ratchasima (Korat)
Chaiyaphum
Phetchabun
Loei
Chiang Rai
Mae Hong Son
Phayao
Chiang Mai
Nan
Lampang
Phrae
Mae Sariang
Uttaradit
Sukhothai
Tak
Phitsanulok
Phichit
Nakhon Sawan
Chai Nat
Lop Buri
Sara Buri
Suphan Buri
Kanchanaburi
Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya
Bangkok
Aranyaprathet
Ratchaburi
Samut Songkhram
Chon Buri
Phetchaburi
Sattahip
Rayong
Trat
Ko Chang
Ko Kut
Prachuap Khiri Khan
Chumphon
Ranong
Ko Phangan
Ko Samui
Surat Thani
Nakhon Si Thammarat
Takua Pa
Ko Phuket
Phuket
Trang
Phatthalung
Kantang
Songkhla
Hat Yai
Pattani
Ko Tarutao
Satun
Narathiwat
Pulau Langkawi
Alor Setar
Betong
Kota Baharu
Sisophon
Batdambang
Phnum Tbeng Meanchey
Siemreab
Pouthisat
Kampong Cham
Kracheh
Phnom Penh
Krong Kaoh Kong
Kampot
Kampong Saom
Dao Phu Quoc
Stung Treng
Lumphat
Loc Ninh
Tay Ninh
Svay Rieng
Ho Chi Minh City
Bien Hoa
Vung Tau
Can Tho
Ca Mau
Con Dao
Saravan
Pakse
Champasak
Attapu
Muang Khong
Savannakhet
Muang Khammouan
Ban Na Phao
Muang Xepon
Louangphrabang
Muang Pakbeng
Muang Xaignabouri
Muang Vangviang
Muang Pakxan
Ban Ban
Tuong Duong

MYANMAR
(BURMA)
T A N E N T A U N G G Y I
D A W N A T A U N G
D A N
B I L A
Sop Moei
Omkoi
Ban Mae Samoeng
Ban Ta Song Yang
Tha Song Yang
Ban Tong Pung
Mae Ramat
Ban Huey Bong
Mae Sot
Myawadi
Kyondo
Kawkareik
Phop Phra
Um Phang
Mulayit Taung
Doi Tao
Thoen
Mae Phrik
Sam Ngao
Chedi Yoota Hutti
Ban Tak
Tak
Somdei Phrachao Taksin Maharaj Shrine
Khao Chomphu
Ban Wang Chao
Kamphaeng Phet Historical Park
Kamphaeng Phet
Khao Kha Khaeng
Khlong Lan
Doi Ta Chi
Ban Dan Lan Hoi
Si Satchanalai
Thung Saliam
Sawankhalok
Si Samrong
Sukhothai Historical Park
Sukhothai
Si Nakhon
Phichai
Uttaradit
Laplae
Mae Puol Waterfall
Den Chai
Phrom Phiram
Phitsanulok
Wat Phra Sriratana Mahathat
Kong Krailat
Bang Rakam
Khiri Mat
Lan Krabu
Phran Kratai
Sai Ngam
Sam Ngam
Banphot Phisai
Lat Yao
Nakhon Sawan
Krok Phra
Sawang Arom
Lan Sak
Thap Than
Nong Chang
Nong Khayang
Phayuha Khiri
Huai Khot
Manorom
Wat Sing
Chai Nat
Sankhla Buri
Ban Rai
Dan Chang
Hankha
Doembang Nangbuat
Khai Bang Rachan
Nong Ya Sai
Sam Chuk
Lao Khwan
Sri Prachan
Don Chedi
Suphan Buri
U Thong
Song Phinong
Phanom Thuan
Bo Phloi
Erawan Waterfall
Khao Phang Waterfall
Sai Yok
Si Sawat
Thong Pha Phum
Srinakarindra
Than Lot Cave
Sangkhla Buri
Sam Ong Cetiya
Khao Yai
Khao Laem
Ye
Lamaing
Taungbon
Onbingwin
Zadi
Nabule
Maungmagan
Mergauglalang
Myitta
TAVOY
MEIN

1

CHAMPASAK

"Every man dies, not every man really lives." — William Wallace

A light drizzle fell on a fallow field near the Mekong River and the stand of thick bamboo where Army Captain Keith Miller, with camouflaged face and hands, lay concealed while awaiting the single-engine Pilatus Porter to touch down by moonlight. The nearby mountain, Phou Malong, with its sheer cliffs resembling battlements rising some thirteen hundred meters above the Mekong, was invisible.

The problem was that the cloud cover obscured any moonbeams so fusees would have to be lit. These temporary signal flares were positioned to help guide the Air America pilot (on covert loan from the USAF) to a safe, albeit bumpy landing.

At zero hundred hours Gai, a wiry Lao anti-communist resistance fighter who accompanied Miller, broke his cover to place a burning fusee on each corner of one end of the temporary landing strip. At the same time, Miller set two at the other end. The fusees would last about five minutes before burning themselves out.

Miller could barely hear the engine hum as it neared the field but he hoped any enemy-friendly observers could not see the ground flares that

were burning. Airplane sounds carried well along the Mekong River basin which reminded him, as he crouched waiting, of the frightened eight year-old girl, nicknamed Ooy (sugar cane). He had met her recently in a food stall near the main airbase farther up the Mekong, known to the GIs as NKP, in the Nakhon Phanom province of northeastern Thailand.

The nightly special-operations helicopters and World War II vintage, propeller-driven planes, plus the occasional jet, brought the youngster to tears each time the unmarked armed reconnaissance flights of T-28's, A-1 Skyraiders, A-26's and C-123's roared off like angry wasps for Laos and Vietnam laden with munitions or personnel.

Nothing he or her mother could do would comfort her, including giving her homemade, coconut ice cream. She did not seem to mind the relatively quieter, smaller O-1 "Birddogs," though. When they took off, she managed to look up and stop sobbing before lapping what little ice cream had not yet melted.

The river city of Nakon Phanom was just across the Mekong from Laos, only five minutes flying-time away, so they could even hear the communist guns across the river futilely shooting in the dark at the low flying planes climbing out and heading east. It was fortunate for the American pilots that the Laotians did not have any SAM's (Russian ground-based surface-to-air missiles) like those harassing and sometimes downing the U.S. fighter-bombers over North Vietnam.

While waiting for the plane he contemplated the notable quote of William Wallace on the eve of his battle between Scotland and England so many years ago: "Every man dies, not every man really lives." Miller was hopeful that neither would he die, nor live alone, should he be spared an early visit from the Grim Reaper. Nevertheless, he felt as though he had one foot on a pier and the other on an unsecured boat as it drifted away. On which place should he try to maintain his footing?

The gap was ever widening, living between American and Asian cultures. He must either return to the stable pier of his American way

of life and the culture with which he had been inculcated or jump onto the Asian boat with which he was now confronted. Here, he would face radically adaping to new customs and languages.

Unlike Dante's Limbo, where one straddles the ever-widening gap eternally, the liminal nature of Miller's situation could not be prolonged for very long before he would fall between the two disparate cultures and either get soaked or, worse, drown. There was no going back, as he recalled John Flory discovering in George Orwell's *Burmese Days*. Miller was beginning to realize this challenge and knew that his decision would have to be made soon if he did not want to live and die alone in a limbo of his own as the unfortunate Flory had. Miller knew that any Westerner continuing to live in Asia was forced into much the same predicament as Flory. Fortunately, however, Miller was a survivor.

For Miller, one of his two options lay in a remote jungle on the opposite side of the world from his home. He was a small-town boy fresh out of college with an engineering degree, plus twenty-eight months in the military. He was set to become well grounded to find his place in Stateside society, but the Army had other plans for him. His new assignment forced him to enmesh himself into a vastly different society. He had to begin learning, not only the languages, but the underlying set of values which were important to all Southeast Asians.

Before his limited training for his overseas tour of duty, and after looking more closely at Asian human resource development, Miller had found that the Western HRD (Human Resource Development) models could not be applied towards understanding Asian mores because the input values are not, by any stretch of the imagination, the same. Miller had been advised, actually warned, back at Fort Benning, by his mentor, Major Timms, a crusty Vietnam veteran of three tours of duty in country.

"Dammit, Miller," Timms said scratching his thinning red hair, "you know there's a difference between how they do things and we do them, don't you? For God's sake, man, if you act like an American over there,

they'll simply ignore you. Do you think you can herd cats?"

Miller felt the bile burn in his chest, but he'd learned long ago not to strongly question a superior officer, especially not an old vet like Timms. He realized he would not only have to develop into a quick study and become conversant in a new and difficult language, but he would also have to rapidly assimilate the major cultural disparities between the two societies.

During his clandestine training inside an air base in Thailand, Miller noticed that there was little resemblance between the constitutional monarchy and multi-party, unicameral parliament of the Thai's model of democracy and America's; nevertheless, their style of government was a democracy and much better for their people than the virtual dictatorships of their neighbors. It was, as the locals put it, "Thai style."

Asia, Miller was learning, was a place where truth is not as important as "face," where substance takes a back seat to image and rank definitely has its privileges. Meritocracies seemed to him to be rather rare in the developing nations of Southeast Asia.

He wondered why Asians had to be so inscruitable. It was disconcerting to see them smile in apparent agreement and understanding, when actually it meant neither.

Miller was amused thinking that perhaps that was the reason why there were forty-five hundred general officers for half a million junior grade officers and men in the Thai military, compared to fewer than a thousand general officers for the three million souls that comprised the U.S. Armed Forces.

How did I even get here? he wondered. The answer came in an instant. In the heat of the moment, for some inner reason that he still-could not quite put his finger on, he had broken the "Golden Rule" in the military. In an Okinawa officer's club bar, perhaps after too many gin and tonics, he somewhat reluctantly whispered to Major Timms, "If you can't get anyone else to do it, then I will."

A damned volunteer. And soon he would be advising and securing

support for the anti-communist resistance fighters who would aid him in rescuing downed aviators and their passengers, not only from the communists and bandits, but from the jungle as well. And not in the heat of the Vietnam battle—not at Hue or Khe Sahn—but in a bucolic land, poles apart in nature and time. It was in this land where a few dedicated Laotians, Thais and Americans, with limited resources, and despite foreign oppostition from Russia, China and North Vietnam, fended off the encroaching communists (more than half of whom were North Vietnamese) at a significantly lower cost in men and materiel than in the "real" war just over the eastern Lao border with Vietnam.

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As his stomach growled, Miller daydreamed about eating and drinking back "in the world" with his friends. He craved for some of the "fixins" as Asian food just wasn't cutting it. For just a moment, he imagined he could even smell the barbecue on that Indian summer afternoon in South Central, Texas. Hot barbecued beef brisket and cold Lone Star beers. Tailgating before their college football game.

It was just past midnight at the end of the wet season, and Miller was lying on the damp ground concealed in a bamboo stand waiting for a plane to land. He staunched his hunger for good ole down home cookin' and returned to the matter at hand.

The pilot approached the makeshift airstrip as silently as one would expect from a smaller "Bird Dog."

This pilot's got his his stuff together, Miller thought. I hope his take-off is just as stealthy.

The field where the plane would be landing would have normally been tall with corn had it not been for the defoliants sprayed from Lao government planes under the guise of opium poppy eradication. The poppy fields were only in the hill country far to the north but that did not matter to the corrupt, puppet government, which was essentially manipulated by the North Vietnamese. Suffering under their lack of

crop predicament, the indigenous people now wanted to use their ammonium nitrate, useless now as fertilizer, for explosives since there was no corn to "side-dress" with it. There was not even any corn left to drink up the water from the recent rainy season, thus it provided a suitable landing strip for Air America.

Miller grimaced at the irony that the nitrate came from the same place as the Agent Orange defoliant; the good ole USA. This is how poorly founded, albeit good intentions frequently result in unintended consequences. Chemicals for growing food crops were useless here because those that prevented plant growth had already completed their destructive work. Miller could only shake his head.

As the plane successfully bounced once and coasted to a stop at one end of the field Miller expelled his breath in a hiss of relief.

A wiry, figure jumped down and ran towards the reeds. Within three minutes from touchdown, the pilot taxied and lifted off in relative silence, hoping not to have been heard by any unfriendly Laotians. He hated these night landings, but parachute drops were too dangerous and unreliable in this area. The precious "cargo" could not be allowed to fall into enemy hands.

Lieutenant Aud, a *tahaanpraan* (Thai ranger) carrying updated maps, radio frequencies and codes, emerged from the reeds. He nodded to acknowledge Miller and Gai, and the three headed for the bush in short order. They would save a briefing and catch-up later when they reached camp.

The Thai Rangers, together with the help of the remaining Lao Royalists and indigenous Lao Thueng (middle range mountain tribes), planned to continue impeding the ever-increasing communist encroachment, as they had done for the past five or so years as evidenced by Aud's arrival. Major Timms had already briefed Miller that the Thais would help conduct even more forays from the camp hidden in the vicinity of the coffee plantations in the nearby mountains, to include some as far as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a night's march to the east.

Miller was more than pleased to support this effective resistance against the Vietnamese-backed communists because it was keeping the much larger foreign-backed forces at bay and had cost Uncle Sam little in terms of human resources and materiel. There was a much better cost-benefit ratio in effect here than in the main war to the east where Tet had played out and communist infiltration and re-supply continued down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It was the beginning of the dry season and Miller and his cohorts knew the enemy would soon be on the move to renew their war.

The usual lowland and mountain valley fog was gradually dissipating and the resistance fighters would not be able to depend on it for cover for long. It was not safe to remain in the lowlands and besides that, Captain Miller was eager to get some sleep in the relatively cooler mountain altitude. The humidity near the Mekong was so thick that Miller felt it would have to be cut with a machete so their patrol could pass.

The spectacular view of the river valley and the waterfalls from the mountain temple, now called Wat Phu, would have to remain unseen to the American officer for a time. Aud, Gai and Miller had to be back on the Bolovens Plateau in the jungle-covered mountains well before daybreak. The three disappeared into some elephant grass, avoiding the rutted and pot-holed roads even though they could make better time in the open. Concealed movement was of the essence, as dawn would soon be breaking in the eastern sky, silently creeping over the mountains bordering Vietnam.

The plane was long gone but enemy observers might not be. Patrols were infrequent yet informers could be an ever-present danger. Verifiable information could be exchanged for food, and more importantly gold, so the three men, after linking up with their young Laven, or Lao Thueng guide, pushed on, ever upward. They moved quickly yet quietly towards the hidden trail to the heights and safety. They kept up as steady a pace as the darkness and foliage permitted. The sun sets rapidly

in the tropics, and they knew that it rises just as quickly.

In the mist, the path rose steeply, some nine hundred meters, to the cooler, more temperate plateau. The men navigated through the vine-covered jungle, past unnnamed deep gorges housing thin, towering waterfalls.

Their metallic gear, including Miller's intricate silver chain from the old, royal capital of Luang Prabang, were wrapped in burlap and tied with plastic and rubber bands to prevent unwanted noise. The chain hung around his neck where his dog tags would normally have been. As a force of habit, he had attached a P-38 can opener to it. It was expedient for more than merely opening C-rations. Miller had used it as a screwdriver and knife on more than one occasion.

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The Pathet Lao were fighting the Neutralists, Royalists, Hmongs and even among themselves, primarily around the strategic Plain of Jars to the northwest; thus, most of them were preoccupied further north and would not be impeding the men's trek to their secret base camp. Miller hoped that the local communists were too far away or too wary of the numerous UXO's (unexploded ordnance) strewn about the province.

Even this far south, in the hot and humid climate, a nighttime tropical downpour could cause hypothermia if one were not on the move or sheltered, especially on the plateau. Luckily for the resistance forces, it seemed the enemy had not yet realized that the rainy season had ended. The only forces watching from the dark trees were the macaques, and fortunately not the Laotian and Cambodian bandits and drug-lord minions.

The monkeys were merely watching for something, preferably edible, to steal. Miller detested the cunning beasts that many thought to be so very cute.

The men reached their base at first light and changed into dry clothes. Uniforms were not worn but camouflage clothing without in-

signia was as common here as blue jeans back home. Their base was more a settlement, yet not quite a village like those in the lowlands. It appeared to those used swidden (slash-and-burn) agriculture on the hillsides to be merely another insignificant hill tribe village, except for the armed sentry who had challenged them. The patrol leader whispered the password and the party entered the settlement without incident, except for the meter-long, angry cobra that had momentarily blocked their path earlier.

This settlement, which was in reality a quasi-military camp with families, included some crude wooden buildings used for administration and meetings. There were also stores and shops, a one-room schoolhouse, a clinic and even a small place of worship with a large, wooden cross nailed over the entrance.

The semi-permanent settlement sat at the junction of a couple of rutted and potholed roads connected to paths wide enough to permit the lone jeep and two pick-ups belonging to the resistance to pass. A few kilometers away was the one main highway connecting Vietnam with Thailand via a ferry across the Mekong. It and the lanes throughout the mountains and the lowlands, were slick with red mud now, but they would soon return to being obscured by red dust. The mud would return again in May.

To cope with the dirt and the heat, there were two showers, one for women and one for men. They were made from elevated, second-hand, fifty-five gallon drums with ice pick holes punched in the bottom. It took two people—one to pour water in the top, the other to shower.

Cleanliness in camp was maintained not only for the body; even in these crude surroundings, the thatched huts had freshly swept dirt floors and the people wore fresh, and sometimes pressed, clothes washed in the nearby stream.

The settlement was atypical of the swidden camps of the highland people, who were sometimes referred to derogatorily as Kha (slave) by the Lao Moun (lowlanders), Montagnards by the French colonists and

simply "Yards" by American Special Forces. The elite leaders of these people spoke, not only their original Mon-Khmer language, but mainstream Lao, so they were conversant in Thai as well. They were more modern than most of their Laven kin, yet they tended to think in terms of seasonal time by using the sun and moon rather than clocks, except for the military operations of course.

The community was in sharp contrast to the more primitive Akha villages, where Miller had previously visited, perched on hilltops in northern Thailand. The Akha women were attired in traditional, colorful dresses with decorative, yet functional leggings. They wore their wealth on the heads in ornate headdresses adorned with silver as they chased and herded pigs or carried donkey's burdens on their backs. Miller was impressed that some even carried babies in slings as they toiled while their men were nowhere to be seen.

On the plateau though, and especially in the lowlands of Champasak province, the dress was more modern, perhaps owing to the influence of Westerners, mainly Americans, with baseball caps and jeans. In addition, Miller had been surprised to see that the men appeared to be sharing some of the village chores, in addition to their military duties, in order to maintain the base camp.

The four men were joyfully, yet quietly, welcomed as Gai relayed news from the outside world in a language similar to Lao. Soon after the greetings and initial briefing, Miller tried to catch some of the conversation between Gai and Major Bpoh, the base commander sans insignia, as they perused the G-2 (air intelligence) Gai had brought. The information Miller was able to glean regarded enemy patrol activity and the location and time of next re-supply of food, medicine and ammunition. Gai would fill him in later in broken English.

All but Miller were smoking strong, roll-your-own cigarettes and drinking equally strong French style coffee as they quietly planned. Miller enjoyed neither and sipped from his canteen while a teen-aged boy with a Chinese-made, Kalashnikov AK-47 assault rifle stood sentry.

None seemed worried about an enemy attack since, as Gai had said with a laugh, "*Maibpenraiatitnaa* (don't worry, next week)."

Miller was not certain about this; however, he knew that the reluctant quasi-governmental forces were not the only ones with informers scattered about the countryside. He was told that there were resistance spies even in the city and the actual government itself.

After the Thai's briefing, Major Bpoh asked Miller if he wanted to observe the re-education of two of three recently captured prisoners. Miller was exhausted from the night's trek and so declined. He did not want to witness the execution of a third prisoner off in the jungle either. The government soldier had raped a local woman during a raid on a nearby lowland village before it was burned to the ground and had forced the rest of the villagers to march in front of the troops to detonate any hidden land mines. Miller had seen already seen enough killing.

Justice was always swift in the jungle but the re-education would take a couple of weeks before the ever blind-folded prisoners were repatriated. It was a terrible Catch-22 for them to be subsequently tortured and questioned by their fellow soldiers for being caught, and then labeled as collaborators.

After the meetings and silent execution, the fighters broke for the mid-day meal. As customary, they ate without the womenfolk in silence. The lack of conversation did not bother Miller as he was acclimating to the different culture he was now experiencing.

Miller relished his lunch of balled sticky rice and *padtprikthaidahm* (a peppery, wild boar dish) washed down with lukewarm tea. He liked the spicy food, but was not as enthusiastic about the tea that was commonly drunk. But he put up with it knowing that it was always best to boil the water from sources near the camp.

The men sat cross-legged and ate silently, family style, in a circle on a large woven mat spread on the packed dirt in the primary meeting hall. The term "hall" could be taken rather loosely because even though

it was made of wood, the doors and windows were merely spaces where air, insects and sometimes rain passed through.

Miller was impressed how the guerillas communicated with so few words. He had wished some of the GIs in Nam had been as quiet during operations. He would soon learn just how few words were necessary in the high context culture into which he had been thrown.

The dwelling floors were raised so that domestic animals could feed and rest beneath them securely. This design also kept the wild and domestic beasts out of the living quarters, except for the odd, hungry, reticulated python snooping for rodents. Miller noticed that the areas below were also used for equipment and implement storage, similar to those in the more settled villages in the lowlands. What special equipment the villagers had on hand, such as a diesel-powered generator, was stored under a tarpaulin and concealed in the underbrush.

Miller did not observe that the group had any crew-served weapons to cover or conceal, surmising that they were too heavy for the highly mobile force. Shoulder-fired and bi-pod supported weapons, supplemented by a couple of forty-millimeter grenade launchers, were sufficient for their missions. Miller should have realized earlier that the heavier weapons were of marginal advantage to the guerilla forces in the steep, mountainous jungles and forests, since they shrewdly tended to avoid pitched battles, preferring hit-and-run operations, even in the lowlands.

As Miller ate, he noticed chickens and ducks roaming the settlement but the larger animals were restrained in crude pens under the huts as well as on the camp's perimeter. Miller meant to ask Gai later whether the Lao Thueng bought or harvested their rice since he never saw hillside paddies on his treks or patrols. He did notice an area where a few women were hand weaving their distinct cloth, which was imbedded with colorful beads. Perhaps there was some clandestine bartering with the Lowlanders at times.

Miller observed how these people seemed well adjusted to their en-

vironment in a much more sophisticated way than the primitive hill-tribe people whom he was led to believe would be his allies. He just could not determine if their lack of conversation was from fear, lack of English skills or, in fact, simply customary. Thus, he remained silent and tried not to ask too many questions. He observed intently though. He was still learning

Miller wondered how one could have a personal or family relationship in such a difficult place and yet, there were births to offset the deaths and other rites such as weddings to mark the cycles and rhythm of life. There were even times when the children would break their unusual silence with a laugh or a giggle.

Western, Thai and even Chinese movies were sometimes shown outdoors against a canvas tarpaulin using a squeaky, sixteen-millimeter projector powered by one of the two fuel-fired generators in the camp. Tonight, it would be a Chinese martial arts picure. Miller never did find out where the movie reels came from but guessed they were smuggled across the Mekong from Thailand, though he found out that the fuel was "borrowed" from the Lao army.

He thought the picture shows were to a certain extent reckless, but he could not begrudge them this one small diversion from their almost monastic lives. However, he was always concerned about security no matter how slow and lazy the other army was. Probably, in part, this caution was because, if he were ever captured, he would be disowned by his own government just like the other non-militarily-identifiable airmen and so-called passengers that he was here to support. He would be accorded none of the Geneva Convention rights granted a uniformed prisoner-of-war. It had to be that way since, after all, there was no official war being carried out by U.S. forces in Laos.

Yet Miller was able to relax a bit, amused by the Hong Kong-produced Kung Fu movie being shown just after dinner. He could not understand the dubbed soundtrack but relaxed by watching the locals grinning and chuckling enthusiastically, obviously enjoying the char-

acters who were leaping and flying about, delivering floating kicks to their evil enemies.

2

MOUNTAIN HIDEOUT

"The guerilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea."
— Mao Tse Tung

Captain Bpoh played the role as informal customs chief as well as his primary position as base commander of the anti-communist force. One morning, he asked his U.S. advisor if he could conduct a special class on converting fertilizer into explosives, as it was of no use for their meager maize or corn crops anymore. Bpoh had other duties to attend, namely, collecting the duty on the teak logs being smuggled into Thailand from the rich forests to the southeast.

This taxation partially supported the resistance as well as covert funds supplied by an unnamed foreign government. He also was on alert for drug traffickers as the group had refused to become involved with the drug trade on principle and thus prohibited narcotics in or through the settlement. Miller was pleasantly surprised and impressed that Captain Bpoh's camp was clean in more ways than one. He still hoped Bpoh would talk to him more because he had to rely on Gai's broken English for most of the information regarding any operational problems he might be able to solve, or at least provide better assistance.

Five men selected by Bpoh would attend the explosives class to learn the proper way to soak the #2 diesel fuel. The petroleum was obtained from the enemy, through the laxness of their security and sometimes outright bribery. It was then soaked into the ammonium nitrate prills, bb-sized balls of dried residue from the molten liquid, creating a mixture which could then be detonated, provided there was the proper ratio of organic material into the compound.

Miller showed them how to evenly mix the oil into the fertilizer to effectively produce a compound with about seven percent of the fuel in it. He then taught them how to pack the mixture into two-pound or kilogram packets to be used in future operations and ambushes designed to impede the Vietnamese and their communist supported armies in and throughout Laos.

Miller had anticipated Boph's special request as he had previously noted that the bags of fertilizer under one of the houses had not been moved in a very long time. The class was no problem as it was related to his advisory role teaching how to render safe the plentiful and varied munitions that covered much of the beautiful countryside of Laos, sometimes referred to as the "Switzerland of Indo-China."

The unexploded artillery and mortar shells, grenades, bombs and the ever-dangerous bomblets were strewn everywhere. One cluster-bomb could open in mid-air and give birth to several of these smaller munitions. Miller had read that an estimated amount of ordinance was fired in, or dropped on, Laos as was on Germany during World War II.

Miller, an EOD (explosive ordinance disposal) officer, continued his secondary mission to train and advise the resistance fighters on how to detect, mark and disarm the dud munitions without maiming or killing themselves or any innocent tribal people. He had to show, rather than tell them how to re-arm certain ones for use, mostly as booby traps against the communists.

Additionally, there were dud rounds and bombs scattered about from many countries, including the USA, China, Russia and other

Eastern Bloc countries, as well as those from previous wars involving France and Japan. There was even the odd and ancient Siamese cannon ball. Miller taught the locals to be wary of them all.

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Miller was relieved that the sign-language class was finally over and he could now visit a small lean-to for a slightly cool Pepsi-Cola procured from Miss Aree, an attractive thirty year-old of mixed Thai and Lao ancestry. In addition to brightening the camp with her charm, she managed to get hold of things such as soft drinks, and even American-style bread, probably from across the river in Thailand, to exchange for U.S. dollars or Thai baht as Lao money was virtually worthless and required a wheelbarrow to carry enough to purchase even the smallest commodity.

To be honest, he preferred the French baguettes abounding throughout the former French Indo-China, albeit not found in never colonized Thailand. But bread was bread, and it tasted good to the Western palate after a diet of rice every day.

Since he did not like the specialty drink of the plateau, a strong French style coffee, the soft drinks were a pleasant respite from the ubiquitous weak tea. But what he wouldn't give for an ice cube.

"All that's missing is the popcorn!" he said as he took the Pepsi from Aree.

"*Arainah* (What did you say?)" Aree said, adjusting her *paanung* (sarong) and smiling

"*Cheopkaapoat lujaakmai,* I like popcorn. Do you know what it is?"

He would have said anything just to get someone to talk to him; especially this raven haired beauty with the beaming smile, as he had little female companionship since leaving Saigon three months ago. Now, no matter what she uttered, her soft voice caused his hormones to flow; however, she merely nodded her head and smiled at him before disappearing behind her cooking area.

Miller felt a pang of loneliness as he day-dreamed what her arms, and legs for that matter, would feel like wrapped around his body. Gai had already said that she was a widow, so Miller could hope and day-dream some more. One never knew what surprises a war and the jungle held in store.

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Captain Bpoh, Lieutenant Aud and Khun (Miss) Aree were the only ones in the camp who spoke or understood any English, yet they spoke infrequently with only a rudimentary vocabulary and very poor pronunciation. He hoped that they were not reticent but merely shy when trying to speak English.

The Thai had little trouble in communicating with the Lao since their languages were quite similar; however, Miller's Thai/Lao language skills were less than impressive even after a six-week crash course for diplomats. But still he managed to communicate somewhat effectively by pointing and gesturing with his arms, hands and even his head, sometimes losing his chalk or pen in the process, much to their amusement. He had been told that keeping them amused was the key to maintaining their interest in learning English...or anything for that matter.

In addition to his explosives class for the men, Captain "Keedt," as he was referred to by the local people who addressed each other by their given names and did not have a "th" sound in their language, had been asked to teach basic English conversation. Of course his students could not read English and so he prepared some elementary lesson plans.

He was told that standard ESL colorful textbooks printed only in English would be of little use because most mountainside people could barely read past the ABCs. This group of students, including Aree as the sole woman, would have to learn rudimentary English by oral instruction and memorization for the most part. It was important for them to be able to at least identify the colored markings and major words on

the munitions and supplies provided by the United States as the labeling was only written in English and included the critical warnings.

Miss Aree, as he called her, beamed him her charming smile from her spot in the back of the makeshift classroom. She was extremely pleasing to Miller's eye as she had the soft complexion and shiny, long, black hair for which Asian women and girls are famous. Her dark, almond-shaped eyes sparkled with light heartedness; however, it caused Miller to be self-conscious as he stood in front of the class sweating buckets into his already soaked clothing. He felt very scruffy in front of the young lady at that moment. If only I could be with her after a shave and a shower in a nice air-conditioned café, or better yet, a hotel room he thought.

How she could exude such an aura of femininity in her squalid surroundings was beyond Miller's experience, but it warmed his heart. He craved the warm feeling she gave him and the brief, broken conversations they had. Yet he knew that any romance would have to wait as it was serious wartime and they dwelled in a small, Christian village.

Miller and his resistance fighters had to keep their minds on their plans and successfully execute mayhem against the communists and their sympathizers who would soon stir from their lowland bases. They also had to remain on alert to rescue any downed friendly aviators or soldiers before the communists could capture or torture them after parading them around for propaganda purposes.

Many prisoners were not even accorded the propaganda treatment as they were sequestered in caves or forced to march from one clandestine camp to another to avoid rescue by groups such as the one Miller supported. They were detained until they died from disease or malnutrition or were simply executed, not always by painless methods. It hurt Miller to realize that many would remain lost in Laos for a long time to come and that he could do little about it. But that didn't mean he wouldn't try.

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In the shade over a light lunch of the ubiquitous sticky rice, balled and dipped into *somtambpladaek* (fermented fish paste mixed into a very spicy salad of unripe papaya), called *somtambplarah* by the Lao people living in Thailand, Bpoh outlined their next action. He spoke while scratching in the dirt with a stick as the men listened intently. Currently, and fortunately for the Americans, there were no downed airmen to rescue or enemy troops on the move. Accordingly, Bpoh decided that the day would best be spent inspecting equipment and redistributing ammunition. The men nodded in agreement. The briefing concluded after a communal smoke break and the men set to work cleaning and oiling their equipment.

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An inspection of men and materiel by Major Bpoh and one of his sergeants was carried out thoroughly in a timely, yet relaxed, manner under the cool jungle canopy. Again, few words were required to get the job done. This was doable because, as Major Timms had said to Miller before he left, "Our friends use a lot of body language to communicate, so don't you talk too much or try to push them around. They just don't work that way and won't like it one damn bit, but they'll never let on. They'll just nod their heads, smile and go on doing what they want while you will think they're following your instructions. Believe me, they're not. You ever try to push a rope?"

Miller was beginning to understand that the Lao (and Thai) were very sensitive to direct criticism and tended to remain silent out of fear of ridicule and loss of face.

Keith Miller was a results-oriented person, but he had learned that the results he valued might not agree with those of the camp unless he could build an esprit de corps within the men. Their focus for any task or action was not on individual success but rather group harmony. He soon learned that he could not succeed with his allies by trying to force them. He must persuade.

Once the inspections and announcements were completed, the men supped on tasty *mooyang* (barbecued pork, or what he was told was pork), *somtam* (spicy papaya salad) and another ball of *khaoniew* (sticky rice).

Miller hoped he had just eaten pork but it had an unfamiliar aftertaste similar to some meat he had at a banquet in Vietnam before arriving in Laos. That meal had been his first taste of dog meat and he was not very fond of the flavor and texture; but the locals certainly were. He thought it must be better with *laolao* or *laokhao* (moonshine whisky) because he noticed some of the men sipping out of a rather grimy, nondescript bottle, and after being offered a swallow, knew the local firewater could kill the taste of anything. He just hoped it would not eat the enamel off his teeth; however, he remained thankful that at least they had not been serving chicken feet again. Dog meat was enough for one sitting.

A few minutes after they finished eating, an older man took out a *kaen* and began to play a mournful but rhythmic song. The *kaen* is an indigenous, musical instrument consisting of long bamboo pipes, with small holes in a centerpiece for the player to blow and inhale in a continuous manner. It buzzed with a reedy sound similar to a mouth-organ even though it did not have a reed. It was soon accompanied by a *morlam*, a man who sang, or rather intoned an epic song which Aree said described the oral history of the group including the hardships of their rural life and sometimes mixed with dry humor.

"Life hard. Work hard. Love. Laugh anyway," Aree whispered to Miller as they sat close in the back of the audience.

He wished she had lingered a bit longer, as her breath had stirred his feelings and set every hair on his body on end, taking his mind off the mournful music for the moment. But, as much as he desired, he knew in his position as advisor that he could not touch her—at least not in public.

He forced himself to turn his attention back to the *morlam* as one of the older women stood and began to dance with graceful head movements using arm and hand gestures to highlight the story.

As she danced and the narrative song wafted on the thick evening air, Miller, the soldiers and their families relaxed on mats mesmerized, gazing at the performers in rapt silence. He felt that the song would never end, although soon he became enmeshed in it. Even though he could not understand many of the words, the song deeply touched him, moving him across the boundaries of geography, language, culture and time.

He recalled once reading a passage attributed to the noted English cellist Jacqueline du Pre, that music was the purest expression of humanity, especially when expressing pain, sorrow and loneliness. In that moment, he could not have agreed more. The transcendence of the music overwhelmed Miller to the point of tears as the embers of the fire slowly ebbed and night enveloped him.