

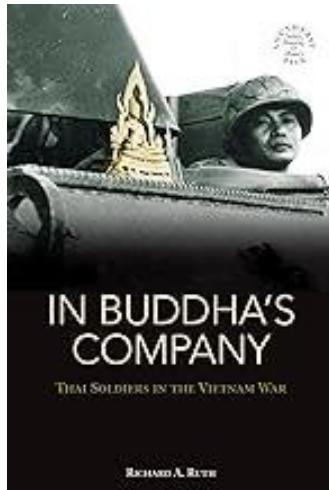
In Buddha's Company: Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War

Richard A. Ruth

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Richard Ruth concludes his admirably well-researched study of Thai soldiers in the Second Indochinese (a.k.a. Vietnam) War with the observation that Thai people, insofar as they are aware of their country's involvement at all, look at the event in the opposite way to most of the rest of the world. Without either regret or doubt, as he puts it, Thais celebrate their performance as part of a successful venture. As he observes elsewhere in the text, this is a part of the general Thai tendency to view their own culture as being unequivocally good; it is, therefore, their role as devout Buddhists – the most devout, in fact – to lead their neighbours to higher levels of spiritual awareness. As Theravadin Buddhists, this is to be done through deeds rather than words.

This is part of a series of factors that made Thais very welcome allies to the US forces and, as a result, their government was willing to pay a great deal in both money and political capital to bring several thousand of them to the field. Outside of Bangkok, the country was still largely rural in nature and lacking in well-remunerated opportunities and so the chance to earn some good money as part an army glamorously fighting overseas was very attractive to many. That the endeavour was blessed both by the royal family and the Sangha only added to the attractiveness. Of course, there were some who did not really need the money but believed in the anti-Communist causes, such as Narong Kittikachorn, of whom Ruth writes:

“It is difficult ... to conjure up the image of Narong Kittikachorn, the son of Thailand’s premier Thanon Kittikachorn, shooting university students from the open door of a hovering helicopter in October 1973 without wondering where he learned such ghastly skills (p.12).”

Fortunately, most of the respondents (although not all) interviewed for this book appear to be less repellent. Indeed, they mostly come across as likeable men more interested in what they can get from the PX (a store with imported goods only available to the serving military of the US and its allies) that can be sold or sent back home, flirting with Vietnamese women in the almost total absence of Vietnamese men and working out how to survive in a Buddhist-animist landscape in which some spirits might be hostile to outsiders. This

last point hints at one of the reasons the Thais were present on the battlefield and a paradox about how they viewed that situation themselves. They were assets to the Americans because they were familiar with the landscape, since most of them had been brought up in similar environments themselves. As a result, they were quickly able to orient themselves in the field and could more easily detect booby traps and minefields. The negative aspect was what they could see which the Americans generally could not, which were the ghosts and spirits which play such an important role in the Thai psyche. There is an entertaining section which describes the biggest and most terrible menace that the Thais feared, which is not tigers, mosquitoes, snakes or diseases but the apparently mild-mannered deer. Over a period of time, the soldiers developed the belief that the muntjac deer that occasionally encountered possessed potent spiritual strength and that to kill one or even to eat part of its flesh would almost immediately bring about their own deaths (a belief supported by case study evidence). However, the potency of other spiritual and religious items and institutions had been weakened by their enemy's adherence to Godless Communism. Consequently, the Thais find it convenient to camp out in Vietnamese graveyards, where the various tombstones and monuments provide useful shelter should enemies approach. This would otherwise have been unimaginable, given the Thai belief in the magical potency of corpses. However, that potency had been drained by the Vietcong's neglect of their temples and monks (Vietnamese people were in any case Mahayana Buddhists who had less use for monks than did Theravadin believers).

The whole book is full of fascinating illustrations of life as a soldier in Vietnam. It is, apart from anything else, a rich example of the superior ability of qualitative rather than quantitative research to understand and explain complex human situations. Ruth systematically tells the story of the volunteers from the process by which they signed up through to training, deployment and then diverse aspects of life in the field. It would have been helpful to have had some consideration also of the impact of their service on their family relationships and their subsequent process but the narrative Ruth does provide is weighty enough already. By allowing the men (no women were permitted to serve) to tell their own stories in extended conversations, we are able to learn what was important to them – besides which, reporting of how many men were involved, in which units and with what equipment and so forth has already taken place. This includes a comprehensive treatment of the use and importance of amulets in protecting against danger and their use in establishing relationships with the GIs is included. There are also vivid accounts of the PX and what were its most valuable offerings, while the sale of narcotics to make extra money to visit the store again is also part of the story. The book is well-written and although it comes with 50 pages of footnotes, these are tucked away at the end of the book and so do not interrupt the reading experience. This is a book which adds to our understanding of warfare and of work and labour under hazardous conditions. It also adds to our understanding of Thai culture in a number of ways. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any other society from which a book like this might spring, certainly not in the context of the war which caused its existence.

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