

SOF ROOTS IN THAILAND

BY MAJOR TODD MARABLE

Gen. (Ret.) Douglas MacArthur famously told a group of cadets in the United States Military Academy Mess Hall, that old Soldiers never die, they just fade away. As the 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) operates throughout the Pacific region, it has begun to preserve the legacy of special operations in Asia and record firsthand accounts of its forefathers.

Many Green Berets were assigned to Southeast Asia in the 1950s and 1960s as a permanent presence. For example, the 46th Special Forces Company activated in Thailand on April 15, 1967, redesignated from Company D, 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne). At the time, the unit was comprised of an all-volunteer force that assembled and trained at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, before deploying to Asia as the 1st SFG(A)'s permanent presence in Thailand. The company based at Camp Pawai near Lopburi with three subordinate B-detachments at Sakon Nakhon, Camp Nong Takoo (Pak Chong), and Ban Kachon with A-teams at multiple locations across the Kingdom of Thailand.

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Special Forces Soldiers in Thailand in the 1950s and 1960s.

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An aerial view of Camp Pawai, located near Lopburi, Thailand, where the 46th Special Forces Company was headquartered.

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The skills these men learned in the Vietnam era, battling communist insurgencies are especially relevant to today's fight, and leveraging those lessons learned are important. Several alumni who remained in Thailand serve as advisors to indigenous partners whom they met

in uniform. Their stories are crucial in preserving SF's legacy.

Master Sgt. (Ret.) James Williams is a 46th Company alum who still lives in Thailand. His unpublished memoirs provide colorful layers of context to the storied history of special operations forces



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in Thailand. He recounts that the 46th Company activated because the 1st SFG(A)'s other three companies were stretched thin in and around Vietnam. The Kingdom had been an ally to the U.S. since Gen. (Ret.) "Wild Bill" Donovan signed a mutual defense treaty in his role as U.S. Ambassador to Thailand following the bifurcation of the Office of Strategic Services after World War II.

When the 46th Company arrived in Thailand, the country faced communist insurgencies on all borders. Laos and Cambodia eventually toppled, in addition to Vietnam. Along the southern border, forces faced another insurgency as an effective British-led Gurkha counterinsurgency force aggressively pursued them in Northern Malaysia.

One of the first missions the 46th Company conducted was to

coordinate with the British and then advise and assist the Royal Thai Army Special Forces to form a blocking force during major Gurkha operations that successfully prevented the insurgencies from finding safe haven in the Chinese dense populations that existed in southern Thailand at the time.

This, and many similar examples, demonstrate how early forward-stationed Special Forces helped the Royal Kingdom of Thailand develop its own COIN capability, protecting a strategic U.S. ally from falling to communist revolution. The legacy of these efforts are still present in Thailand, scattered on artifacts across the Kingdom on markers, monuments and tombstones. Camp Carrow in Trang near the Malaysian border is named after Billy E. Carrow, a 46th Company member who was lost in Laos in 1967.

As these legacies surface, the 1st SFG(A) is leveraging the expertise of its alumni to capture the history and incorporate lessons learned to form training opportunities, specifically the expertise in jungle warfare, COIN and unconventional warfare. 1st SFG(A) continues to work with alumni, the Thailand defense attaché and USA-SOC's history office to ensure early efforts are properly honored. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maj. Todd Marable formerly commanded Bravo Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne), and is currently assigned to Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR). He has served combat tours in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Republic of the Philippines and numerous JCETs in Southeast Asia. Maj. Marable holds a master's degree from Columbia University.

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