

Life Changes among US Veterans in Thailand and Local Reactions – A Short Outline of a Qualitative Study

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Several years ago, I became interested in the topic of life changes brought about by emigrating to a foreign culture. This happened naturally as a result of my own emigration to Thailand and personal experiences following from this. The research project presented here is an ongoing project carried out in cooperation with members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Association in Udon Thani, Thailand. This group consists of some eighty American men who served in the US Air Force base in Udon Thani and other cities during the Vietnam War (1962 to 1973). The veterans chose to live on in Thailand after the Vietnam War was over, and selected Udon Thani City, where they had originally been stationed, as their future home. So far, thirty former US soldiers have been interviewed in connection with this project.

The aim of this study is to explore and describe how the experience of serving in the US Air Force in Thailand at that time influenced and changed the lives of the men involved. A secondary aim of the project is to discover and describe patterns in the reaction of the local Thai people to the presence of a military base with over five thousand foreign soldiers. The research method used is semi constructed qualitative interviews, analyzed, and interpreted in the hermeneutical tradition (Kvale, 1996; Palmer, 1969). Since this will be quite familiar to most readers of this newsletter, I will not go into the general method here.

Some preliminary findings of this study and reflections on methodology used will be described here. First, an explanation is needed for those not familiar with the scene of the research and the nature of the research topic. In 1962, the US became involved in the Vietnam War as a result of the Domino theory, adopted by the US Government and presidents Kennedy and Johnson. This theory stated that if one of the five South East Asian countries (Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar / Burma) became dominated by a communist regime, then the rest of the countries would also become communist. This was considered a serious threat by the US government. After France gave up defending their rule in their former colonies of Vietnam and Laos, the US stepped in with military force to fight the communist troops. Thailand was never directly involved in the Vietnam War but the US government sent thousands of troops and fighter and bomber airplanes to the country, which was used as a platform to bomb communist military bases in Vietnam and Laos.

Most of the US soldiers were young men, aged between eighteen and twenty-two when they arrived in the country. They had never been to Asia before and encountered a profound culture shock when they arrived. The study shows that most of them were single, had limited work experience and their formal education was limited to the high school or vocational college levels. They were not war-hardened soldiers in any sense but had, of course, undergone

necessary training in the US. There was very limited direct war experience associated with being stationed in Thailand, except for a small group of soldiers engaged in special operations. The bomber crews of the B-52's flew to selected targets and dropped their loads on them, returning to home bases without much resistance from ground missiles or other threats. The fighter pilots, however, had a much rougher experience. Over 150 US fighter planes flying from Nakhon Phanom, located on the banks of the Mekhong River, were reported missing over Laos in only four years, during 1968 to 1972. The fighter pilots, almost without exception, were killed, either on the ground or in the air. Most of the bodies were never recovered.

Several themes emerged from the interviews with the veterans. These can be associated with the following specific categories. 1. Life in the US before the move to Thailand took place. 2. The personal experience of being a US soldier in an Asian country during the Vietnam War. 3. The situation the soldiers faced when the war was suddenly over. 4. Making the decision to leave the US and life after the war in Thailand.

I will now describe the main patterns that have appeared in each category.

Life in the US before the move to Thailand took place. Many of the soldiers came from small towns, for example in the US Midwest, where life had been peaceful. They had sweethearts at home but were not married. They had worked as farmhands or at other jobs not requiring great skill. Their parents were usually in their forties and in good health. Although considered grown men and soldiers, many of them were homesick and missed their families and friends at home.

The personal experience of being a US soldier in an Asian country during the Vietnam War. Most of the soldiers were drafted by the US government and had no idea about what Thailand was like. They were surprised by the hot climate with temperatures around 30 or more degrees Celsius for most of the year. The culture, a traditional agricultural society using primitive tools for farming such as oxen and plows, the way people dressed and the poverty of the farming families was another shock. In Udon Thani City, businessmen soon made use of the tremendous business opportunities that the presence of the soldiers, seemingly with great sums of money at their disposal, presented. Several hotels were built and at one time, over seventy go-go bars were operated. The influence of the US Air Force had profound effects on the local culture and economic life. The CIA, for example, built a large hotel, the Udon Hotel, for officers and administrative staff early in the war, because there was no suitable accommodation in the city.

As a result of the war and the presence of the soldiers, the formerly peaceful city of Udon Thani was transformed overnight. The bars and the cafes were open 24 hours a day and operated by staff on shift-work. Most of the young men were automatically thrown into the maelstrom of the nightlife. They had numerous girlfriends. Some of them got engaged and a few soldiers later married local ladies, despite the efforts of the US military to discourage this.

Another important influence experienced by the young soldiers was the feeling of being suddenly considered to be rich men by the local population. The US dollar was very strong in proportion to the Thai baht, the local currency. The nature of the exchange rate was such that even the low soldiers' wages was more than enough to lead an almost luxurious life. It was not

a problem to frequent the bars every night of the week, buy gifts for their girlfriends, take taxis, go bowling or to the cinema or whatever the heart desired. Being considered rich by the local people rose to the soldiers' head, and changed their self-image, in some cases permanently.

The situation the soldiers faced when the war was suddenly over. When the Vietnam War was over, the US Air Force closed its bases in Thailand and the soldiers were sent home. Overnight, the life of entertainment and joy was finished with. Back in the US, the former soldiers met with hostility and even shame as a result of the protests and general ill feelings against the Vietnam War. This was a great shock to them. Going back to the old ways of existing proved too much for some of them. A second problem had to do with the soldiers who had married Thai girls and started to live with them in the US. The girls were greatly disappointed by the kind of life they lead in America. In Thailand, their husbands had been considered important and rich men. Now, back in the US, the Thai wives discovered that they had married men who had little or no money, and could not afford the kind of lifestyle they had dreamt about earlier. Some of the wives divorced their husbands and re-married men who had more money. This was a great heartbreak for many of the soldiers who really loved their wives and felt greatly betrayed by them. Their inability to lead the kind of lifestyle their wives wanted made them angry at the US society and they became frustrated by their ill fate.

Making the decision to leave the US and life after the war in Thailand. The majority of the soldiers harbored a wish to move back to Thailand, and the frustration with life in the old home country motivated them to consider this seriously. The problem was how to make a living in Thailand. Some of the veterans had war injuries that enabled them to get a government pension. Soldiers who had served for a long time could also get a pension that made it possible for them to live in Thailand. Others tried to get a job as teachers, teaching English in local schools. Almost without exception, the experience of going back to Thailand was rather frustrating. The old friends had disappeared and the general atmosphere of the country was different in peaceful times. Some soldiers took to heavy drinking. Others were successful at their jobs. The common theme here is that the Thailand experience changed the men, and the common attitude among them was that they were unable to live in the West. But being a foreigner in an Asian culture is not easy. You are living in between two cultures, you have left your home country for good, and your new country only accepts you up to an extent.

This means that the soldiers had to create new personal identities that fitted with the Asian environment and their past and present life. When asked, 'why did you choose to live in Thailand?' this new identity usually appears in the way the question is answered. A part of the answer is justification, but the main reasons given are that this move was somehow inevitable. Something in the way of destiny. Now, being in their late fifties or in their sixties, these men are not young any more. They feel that they have given up a career and an education in the US that could have been far more profitable than being a retired soldier living in Thailand. There is a feeling of regret and also a feeling of having done what was inevitable. There is a kind of fatalism here, which may have been enhanced by the Buddhist influence that transcends every aspect of Thai society. These men love Thailand, but have had a hard time putting together all the pieces in their lives.

The reaction of the local Thai people to the presence of a military base. There are some patterns here that are consistent. I interviewed twenty-five local men and women who lived in Udon Thani City at the time of the Vietnam War. The common main themes that emerged from the interviews with them are the following. 1. The peaceful existence in Udon Thani before the war. 2. The arrival of the soldiers and the total transformation of the city into an entertainment and service center where the military played a central role. 3. Problems that happened when local women got pregnant by the soldiers. 4. Social problems. 5. Economic progress and development.

Some mothers never knew the real name of the men who got them pregnant and when the soldiers left the women with a child behind, some of them never got in touch again. The Thai society adopted these children as normal Thai citizens, but the children – now people in their thirties – have never known their real father. The Thais sought help from the US Embassy in Bangkok but usually without success because the information the mothers had about the children, was insufficient or almost nil.

It often happened that young Thai males attacked the US soldiers because of jealousy. The local girls were mostly interested in the foreigner who had a lot of money, and this made the local young men angry. They would wait in groups at dark corners and beat up the US soldiers when they were drunk, alone and on their way back to camp late in the night. I have interviewed a few Thai men who participated in these activities. Now, being in their late forties or fifties, they regret their behavior, but explain that they suffered agonies when the local girls would not even look at them.

It is clear that the city and people of Udon Thani has benefited economically from the US Air Force Base. For example, the US built a large airfield that is still used today for domestic flights. The huge amount of American money that was poured into the city resulted in new companies, stores, hotels, bars, and cafes. The educational system was also expanded and an AUA center established. Thai women who married Americans usually built a house in the city or in the surrounding villages. They also supported their families for a long time, because it is a tradition and a duty of children to support their parents in Thailand.

Short reflection on methodology. It is clear that this study is socio-psychological in its essence. It is not possible to explain the whole context of the research subject and the environment otherwise. The interviews were conducted by the author of this article, using the Thai language when speaking with locals and English when speaking with the veterans. The transcription process was lengthy and tedious, as is usually the case in interview studies, but a clear interview guide that was connected to specific categories or themes made the consequent job of analysis a lot simpler. Many interesting themes appeared during the analysis of the interviews. For many of the people interviewed, it was a pleasant and an interesting experience. Several things appeared during the interviews that had to be eliminated for personal or even security reasons. It was not a problem to get people to participate in this project because the research theme was important in their lives.

Literature:

Kvale, S. (1996), *InterViews. An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Palmer, R. E. (1969). *Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*. Evanston, Ill. Northwestern University Press.