

THE LAST SIAMESE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

A Print Point of View

The Rise of Asian Advertising

Addresses

THE LAST SIAMESE

JOURNEYS IN WAR AND PEACE

Teddy Spha Palasthira



The Post Publishing Public Company Limited
BANGKOK

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To my late parents who were exemplary Siamese

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FOREWORD

The social and political landscape of Thailand changed forever after three momentous events in the last century. The first happened in 1932 when the world knew our country as Siam: a group of young army officers and officials seized power and forced King Prajadhipok, Rama VII, to give up his absolute powers and accept a constitutional monarchy. It was the nation's first coup d'état. The second event was the Second World War, in particular the Japanese attack on the American Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor in 1941, bringing the war to the shores of Southeast Asia, and the third was when Thailand became a staunch anti-communist ally of the United States, culminating in the Vietnam War in 1965. At the turn of each event, the Thai people were forced to take sides.

This book tells the stories of a select group of people in Siam in the last century who witnessed these events and how their lives were affected, and how some of them unwittingly ended up on opposing sides. The stories in this book cover a span of a century and a broad swath of events – from an era when the young people of Siam were brought up in a world heavily dominated by class, monarchy and religion, to an era when Western imperialism was coming to an end and finally to the post-Second World War when America became the dominant global power.

This is not a history book nor a collection of biographies, but entertaining essays on diverse individuals. What they have in common is that each person led an uncommon life and each chapter

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is an exciting adventure that took place in exciting and tumultuous times. Teddy rightly calls this book “Journeys in War and Peace”. When I put this book down, I was reminded of the turbulent history of the last century that I lived through and was fortunate enough to survive. I am glad that Teddy has chosen to help us remember some of these events. I hope that this book will help younger readers become aware of our nation’s recent past and better understand the way we were.

Anand Panyarachun

Former Prime Minister of Thailand

INTRODUCTION

The Last Siamese comprises twelve stories about prominent people of exceptional talent and vitality born between 1872 and 1930. In those years, foreigners knew the country as Siam, although the Siamese themselves called it *muang Thai* (or “The Land of the Free”) and referred to themselves as *khon Thai* (“Thai people”). In 1939, Field Marshal Pibulsonggram, who was also born “Siamese” and is a subject of this book, changed the country’s name from Siam to Thailand. This policy was the source of some contention until the matter was decisively concluded in 1949. From that point on the country has been known as Thailand.

I had the good fortune to know some of the characters in *The Last Siamese* and others I met as a child through my parents. They were people of courage and imagination. Some changed the course of Thai history, some were controversial, and still others were unsung heroes who did their best under trying circumstances. All led exciting and adventurous lives, in exciting and adventurous times during the last century, and they were all patriotic people of resolve, leadership and unselfishness, qualities I find sadly lacking in our society today.

I have included one foreigner, Captain Hercules Dennis, who felt more Siamese than British towards the end of his life. Only one figure is still with us: Kamsing Srinawk, a patriotic Isan writer whose work has been translated into nine languages. He sought refuge in Sweden during the witch-hunt for communists in the seventies. Today he is happily retired on his farm in Pak Chong.

Some of the characters in the book had conflicting political views. Readers are advised that *The Last Siamese* is not meant to be a scholarly work nor a political treatise, and therefore supports neither side of the political spectrum. Suffice to say, all twelve figures lived during a period of great global and national upheaval. They represented different sides of the same coin. Imperialism, Nazism, Fascism and Communism, as well as the Free Thai, are movements of the past. Let them remain in the annals of history so that writers like me can have some *divertissements*.

I could have called this book *The Last of the Siamese: A Dying Breed*, but I didn't set out to be polemic and needlessly get myself into an argument. I simply wanted to tell some inspiring stories about real people who lived in a very different era from the present one. I myself am proud to be both Siamese and Thai. When I was young I was brought up to respect our Thai name, and the patriotic concept of being "free" was drummed into my psyche. We were told repeatedly by our parents and teachers that we were never colonized. I confess I am not proud to be Thai when our name is used by modern politicians in vain, purely for personal and political profit. I am repulsed by political party names like *Prachakorn Thai* (The Thai People), *Pheu Thai* (For Thais), *Chart Thai Pattana* (The Thai Nation Development), *Thai Pen Thai* (Thais Are Free), *Ruam Jai Thai* (United Thais), *Chart Thai* (Thai Nation), and *Thai Rak Thai* (Thai Love Thai). The last assumes that you do not love your country if you didn't vote for *Thai Rak Thai*. These politicians are far from being the patriots that I depict in my book. We have become our worst enemy. It is times like this that I naively feel Siamese.

In the absence of letters and diaries, except in the cases of Prince Subha Svasti and Captain Dennis, and personal notes from Dr. Samarn, primary research became painstakingly slow and cumbersome (no secretary or assistants). Fortunately, I was able to conduct in-depth interviews with many friends and relatives of my subjects. My research took me to Britain, Sweden, Berlin, Lake Garda

INTRODUCTION

in northern Italy, the Plain of Jars in Laos, Vietnam, and in Thailand to Udorn, Petchabun, Chiang Mai, Prachuab Kirikhan, Tarutao island, Pak Chong, the River Kwae and many other interesting locations. I went in search of new perspectives on some already well-known people, who had each in their own way tried to make our country a better place to live. When I was teaching creative writing at the Missouri School of Journalism in America, I discouraged student reporters from lifting material from the Internet (which they often did). If it's already on Google, there's no point whatsoever in writing about it. I have tried to use Google sparingly, although it was of great help when I needed to check my historic facts, or to look up a word in Swedish or Japanese.

I have endeavoured to liven up some episodes and anecdotes by treating these historic figures as if they were fictional characters, which may well be how they would secretly like to be treated. However, I have always sought to remain faithful to the personality and character of my subject, and to the events as they truly happened. Due to the lack of material on actual conversations during some of these events, I have occasionally given my characters voices, presenting imagined dialogue in order to bring them to life and to better capture the dramatic mood of the time.

I have used both "Thailand" and "Siam" throughout the book to describe our country, depending on the relevant historic era that is depicted and the circumstances of the story. In deference to Premier Pibul, I have used "Thailand" in his chapter; he would undoubtedly have preferred it that way. Khamsing is, of course "Thai", more Thai than the rest of us, if we recognize that the Lao/Isan people are direct descendants of the T'ai tribes that came from Southern Yunnan.

I could have selected many other great Siamese people for this book, but I was working under a deadline. Writing is a lonely business and I wasn't prepared to take a year off in total isolation to complete such a big project. God willing, I will continue to do

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research for my next book. *The First Siamese* is the current working title.

I have discovered that in the course of writing *The Last Siamese* many kind people have been both sympathetic and encouraging, especially the friends, relations and descendants of my characters. I thank them all. Acknowledgements to these helpful people are at the end of the book, together with a bibliography.

I am grateful to Thailand's former prime minister Anand Panyarachun for kindly writing the foreword. Special thanks go to Nicholas Grossman for his editorial feedback and patient guidance, and to Supakorn Vejajiva of the *Bangkok Post*, my publisher, for his support and confidence in my work. I am indebted to Prisna Boonsinsukh for her excellent translation for the Thai edition and for keeping me on track with Thai history, and to Teerapong Hoonnirun for the cover design and artwork production. Julian Atkinson again came to my help in typing the manuscript.

One final observation: If you want to find out who your true friends are and you want to enjoy your old age, write a book. It has worked for me.

Teddy Spha Palasthira

Hua Hin, Thailand, 2013.

SO SETHAPUTRA

1903 - 1970

A mining graduate from England
who found his vocation in prison





Previous page: Sor's identification tag, prisoner number 26, in Roman letters; there was no Thai language stamping machine in the prison

Above: Sor was always well groomed on Tarutao island, where he served part of his sentence from 1939 to 1943

1

How to Write a Dictionary in Prison

The prows of two small steamers thrust through the dark rippling waters of the Talo Udang Bay and laid anchor three hundred metres offshore at Tarutao island in southern Thailand. The tide was much too low for the *Adang* and the *Rawi* – converted Japanese fishing boats – to land on the beach. Seventy passengers – all prisoners – waded ashore in complete darkness.

Prisoner number 26, thin, weary, yet in good spirits, was the last to disembark. As he moved slowly through the waist-deep water, a heavy cardboard box precariously balanced on his head, his main concern was the safety of its contents: 22 tins of State Express cigarettes, one tattered 1924 edition of the Concise Oxford Dictionary (minus cover), several English language classics, sixty exercise books, 5 pens and 73 nibs, six bottles of ink, three dozen pencils, and most precious of all, a partially completed manuscript in longhand.

Today, the lonely, untouched island of Tarutao is the headquarters of Southeast Asia's largest marine park. Its forest-clad hills rise seven hundred metres above the intense blue Andaman Sea on the western horizon, its jungles wet with rain stretching down to the beach, while the craggy limestone cliffs on the eastern side of the island plunge dramatically into the ocean. Numerous streams

and waterfalls cut through the mountainous interior. A thick canopy of rainforest up to forty metres high provides a secure retreat for wild boar, long-tailed macaques, hornbills and mousedeer. In the azure sea, dolphins, sea turtles, octopus, rays, angelfish, even sponges, thrive undisturbed. The coral reefs of the marine park are some of the world's most spectacular. For holidaymakers, it is paradise.

In 1939, however, for the newly arrived political prisoners who were transferred there from Bangkok, Tarutao was grim and forbidding. They spent the night shivering on the beach, huddled uncomfortably together in an open makeshift lean-to, with just a flimsy palm thatch roof to protect them from the wind and rain. Behind them, the jungle and its dark menacing forest were foreboding. The piercing screams of the wild boars and the eerie shrills of the macaws put fear into their hearts. The cold, wet monsoon wind was slapping noisily against the palm thatch, keeping them awake for most of the night. By the time it was dawn, they were too weary to marvel at the first gentle rays of the rising sun streaking the eastern sky with shafts of pink and gold.

The prison camp at Talo Udang Bay, located at the southern end of the island, had been established as a penal colony for political prisoners in 1937. There was an existing prison camp for hardened criminals and murderers on the east coast at Talo Wao Bay. These two prison camps were separated by a 12-kilometre track built by the common prisoners. The two classes of prisoners were kept apart, although some of the less dangerous inmates were often called upon to work for the political prisoners.

Tarutao had been chosen for its distance from Bangkok – over 1,000 kilometres – and for its treacherous shark-infested waters. The southwest monsoon that battered the western shore from May to October and the northeast monsoon that hit the eastern side from November to April made travel to and from the mainland difficult and dangerous. Escape was not an option.

So Sveshthaputra (pronounced Sor Sethabud and now written Sethaputra) – Prisoner 26 – had no intention of escaping, although escape had become the main topic of discussion for the political prisoners during their first weeks on the island. Sor¹ had his own agenda. He had to finish his life's work.

Sor's life, like those of his fellow political prisoners, had been drastically altered by the events of a decade earlier, on 24 June, 1932, when a small group of French and German-educated military officers and civil servants positioned a few tanks in front of Dusit Palace and staged a successful coup d'état against King Rama VII, demanding a constitutional monarchy.

King Prachathipok had, in his own words, long "considered making this change" himself and was already preparing to give up absolute power "for the good of his people." As it transpired, the military faction that seized power did not set up a true democratic constitutional monarchy. Much of the literary and academic intelligentsia of the time, including Sor, had long suspected that many coup leaders were not concerned with the "good of the people."

Back in 1923, Sor, a mining engineering student in England, had learned that the students in France were plotting against the monarchy and even then he had his reservations. He commented in a letter home: "I am afraid that they are not interested in democratic change." He later wrote when he returned to Siam that parliamentary democracy cannot be instituted by military rule; it is a gradual learning process, requiring education, experience and good will.

When Sor returned to Siam in 1926, he did not pursue a career in mining. He was a gifted writer and was more interested in journalism. He worked at the *Daily Mail* as a political correspondent. In 1928 he was recognised by His Majesty the King

1 To avoid confusion, So's name will be spelt as it is pronounced - "Sor" - in this chapter.

for his communication and language skills and was appointed Royal Spokesman, today's equivalent of press secretary. He was given the royally-bestowed title of Luang Mahasit Woharn, the "man of great eloquence."

Sor went on to serve the king and queen as an analyst and adviser on current diplomatic affairs, foreign trends and local personalities, and became an integral part of the official secretariat of the Royal Household. Sor also shared the same ideals as His Majesty, that a constitutional monarchy supported by a true democratic parliamentary system would soon prevail in Siam. After the 1932 coup replaced absolute monarchy, Sor resigned his government commission and became a prominent anti-coup activist.

Not all military officers supported the coup. The former Minister of Defence and cousin to the King, Prince Bovoradej, popular among the ranks for his opposition to salary cuts for 91 officers, joined a group of anti-coup loyalists. He was able to raise the victorious royal standard in the provinces of the north and northeast and expected loyal support from the troops in Bangkok.

On the morning of 11 October, 1933, Prince Bovoradej woke up early. In the predawn chill at his Saraburi command post, he prepared for the battle of his life. After reviewing the loyal battalions from seven northern and northeastern provinces, he quickly marched on the capital. Lightly armed, the officers with Mauser pistols and Lee-Enfield rifles for the troops, by noon he quickly reached the freshly harvested rice fields of Ayudhya.

The objective, and the ultimatum, was simple but naïve: to obtain a more democratic government. The much hoped-for support from the Bangkok garrisons never came. On the evening of 13 October a young and up-and-coming colonel, Plaek Pibulsonggram, opened a heavy artillery attack on the rebels' positions, and two weeks later the rebellion was quashed with a bloody skirmish at Don Muang.

On 4 November, 1933, Sor was arrested with 300 other supporters. He had acted as the rebel's political spokesman. Three months later he was found guilty for ostensibly publishing and distributing "Save the Country" pro-rebellion pamphlets, although the authorities had wanted to put him away long before. The leaflets were simply a legal pretext and Bovoradej's rebellion an official excuse. He was already deemed guilty for his political commentaries and sentenced to life imprisonment for sedition.

Surrounded by a high concrete wall and topped by an electrocuted razor wire, Bang Kwang prison, where Sor spent the first years of his sentence, was impregnable. Originally a high-security prison built in 1931 for common criminals, after the 1932 coup, Ward Six was rebuilt and redesigned for political prisoners. Each chamber was widened to 20 square metres to house 12 prison cells. An open corridor connected all 50 chambers, to enable the guards easy access.

Many of the political prisoners were members of the educated class, and boasted university degrees from Europe and America. Thirty-three of them decided that the best and only way to use their time in prison productively would be to teach and share their knowledge and learning with other less fortunate inmates. Some even opted to learn new skills. For example, His Highness Prince Sithiporn Kridakorn, brother of Prince Bovoradej, and *eminence grise* of this elite group, was a professional agronomist and a gentleman farmer. His experimental Bang Berd plantation south of Hua Hin had yielded a variety of exciting new produce, including larger eggs, juicy cantaloupes and pumpkins, giant marrow squash and other vegetables. He decided to conduct classes in agriculture and husbandry. Many young hopeful inmates from the countryside became devoted students. Phraya Saraphai Phipat, a naval captain, chose to learn Mandarin from a Chinese prisoner suspected of being a communist. Another senior prisoner gave Japanese lessons.

Sor volunteered to give English-language reading and writing classes in his small cell. One of his ex-students recalls Cell 42 being transformed into an English language classroom: "Professor Sor Sethaputra, small and frail, with huge eyeglasses that framed his face, sat cross-legged, propped up by a folded mattress against the wall, his students forming a half circle around him." To augment his students' English reading experience, Sor ordered non-political books and picture magazines from outside, and borrowed books from the Neilson Hays Library in Bangkok. Ward Six soon became a small university campus, with daily book readings and classes.

The Thai prisoners had little difficulty reading some English, or for that matter Latin, French, Spanish or Italian, having learned the Roman alphabet from a very early age at school. But there, their skills ended. They understood very little of what they read. Sor was constantly called upon to translate difficult English words and sentences. Sor realized his students clearly needed a good dictionary. The first comprehensive English-Thai dictionary was thus conceived.

At 30, Sor was still in his prime. Realising that he could very well be inside for the rest of his life, he made the momentous decision to embark on what he called his "Life's Work." This immense undertaking kept him focused for the next eleven years and provided him with both intellectual stimulus and a regular income.

For the first time in weeks Sor slept well. He now had a mission to fulfil and he was eager to get started. The question that he kept on asking himself that night was: "How does one even *begin* to write a dictionary in prison?" He thought about all the obstacles that had to be overcome, the materials that would be required, and, most important of all, the help he would need.

All writing by political prisoners intended for outside readership – other than letters – was strictly forbidden at Bang Kwang. The fundamental problem of writing in secret, often at night, hiding the manuscripts and preparing them for publication was quite easily solved though. Writing under the subterfuge of English classes

easily deceived the guards. Every nook and cranny under the poorly constructed ceiling of Ward Six became perfect hiding places. Even the most painstaking calligraphy prepared for the final manuscript was furtively integrated into Sor's English writing class. The delivery of writing paper and instruments into prison was simply a matter of negotiation with the guards.

The single most difficult barrier that had to be overcome was smuggling the completed manuscripts past the guards of Ward Six and the high security checkpoint at the prison gates. The solution came later.

The easy part of writing a dictionary in prison for Sor was its actual execution. Here, Sor was in his element. What better way to occupy his fertile mind than to fully explore his extensive knowledge of the arts and sciences and to use his creative talent to write good English and Thai prose? Sor ingeniously designed and built a functional writing desk and comfortable chair from packing crates. Never short of assistants to do the meticulous physical transcribing, copying and calligraphic work, he instituted a strict daily routine for himself and his team. Up at six, start work at seven-thirty until lunch break at eleven-thirty, back to work at two-thirty until dark. He would often get up in the middle of the night to write a word or phrase that had been bothering him all day.

His organizational skills and self-discipline became legendary in Ward Six. A young member of his team recalls those magical moments: "Sor was the brain and we were the labour. He would sit there, cross-legged, and suddenly burst out with a word or phrase; and we would immediately transcribe it onto paper."

When he reached the letter "G", Sor decided the time was right to market his grand dictionary project. He secretly got in touch with Phraya Nibhon Pojanart, one of his old connections, owner of *Krungdheb Bannakarn*, Bangkok's leading bookstore.

Sor and Phraya Nibhon came up with a brilliant marketing approach and a unique publishing deal. The dictionary would be

published in weekly instalments over a period of two years and when the collection was complete, subscribers could bind them together into two volumes, a total of 2,400 pages. Sor was to be paid by instalment, providing him with much needed income.

The political solution was equally brilliant. Phraya Nibon's official line to the authorities was to say that he had commissioned Sor to write the dictionary between 1927 and 1932, *long before* he went to prison.

The first instalments of *The New Model English-Siamese Dictionary* were an immediate success. It was like no other dictionary so far published in Siam. Sor wanted his dictionary to reach out to his readers. Each English word was explained by a simple sentence that vividly rendered its meaning and usage, based on current affairs, Sor's personal life experiences, his education in England and events in Siam past and present. Here are some examples:

abdicate	His Majesty abdicated
absent	Freedom of the press is absent
accuse	They were accused of treason
alma mater	Suan Khularb was his alma mater

As a qualified mining engineer, Sor had a sharp mind, inherited from his father, an inquisitive scientist who spent his life inventing new contraptions. His mother was equally free-spirited and independent-minded, one of the few Siamese women at the turn of the last century who could read and write. It was from his mother that he developed a passion for literature, books and writing. Sor was blessed with his mother's support and encouragement; she devoted her entire life to him after his father died.

mother	Motherly love can never be destroyed
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It was his mother Gaysorn who smuggled his manuscripts out

of prison, using the outer cylinder of a large Thermos flask to insert and hide the materials. In order not to arouse suspicion by using the flask once too often, a false bottomed basket was also introduced. Sor must have chuckled to himself when he wrote this entry:

false The documents were concealed under the false bottom of the box.

Gaysorn was to smuggle almost 2,000 pages out of Ward Six.

After 1937, Sor and his co-inmates were lucky to have Major General Chlor Srisarakorn as their liberal-minded prison warden. He built tennis courts at Bang Kwang so prisoners could have adequate physical exercise. More importantly, he allowed political prisoners out one day a week. Some went to the cinema, others visited friends, but most went home. Sor himself was able to date a young girl working with her sister who owned a grocery store opposite the prison. Sor's first son was born in 1939 from this union. The son, Dr. Chaiya, now a retired surgeon, told this writer it wasn't until 5 years later that he met his father for the first time. Provided the political prisoners were back at Bang Kwang by 6 p.m., they were treated humanely and respectfully, and were free to come and go on their day off.

More personal freedom had made life slightly better, though conditions inside were becoming much worse. The guards had been instructed by the paranoid government to make more thorough searches, not just at the prison gates checkpoint, but also inside the cells. Smuggling Sor's material out of prison had become more difficult. Letters they wrote were carefully inspected and censored before being allowed out of Bang Kwan.

These measures were taken, in part, because the political prisoners of Ward Six were increasingly becoming a liability to the state. Their proximity to Bangkok and their political activity inside prison gave them a unique public voice and a new popular prominence. The government discovered that they were *more* of a threat together in prison than they ever were before they went

inside. When the prison authority found a radio in Sor's cell, he was falsely accused of communicating with Bovoradej, the rebel prince, who was miles away in exile, in Vietnam. Now that they had more personal freedom to come and go, many were accused of subversive activity and treason. The government finally decided that the only way to exercise full control would be to send them as far away from Bangkok as possible. The Department of Corrections conducted a feasibility study of the most inaccessible islands in Siam. In May 1937 Tarutao was selected. It took a further two years for the Department to get Tarutao ready for the prisoners' transfer. By early September 1939 when they started their journey south to Tarutao, Sor had been incarcerated at Bang Kwang for nearly six years. The dictionary was now up to the letter "T".

Sor was never one for big breakfasts. A cup of tea and the obligatory cigarette would suffice. For the others, their first meals on Tarutao were sickening. The rice gruel was gritty, hardly warm enough to fuel their weak, shivering bodies after a cold night on the beach. The accompanying salted meat was putrid and the preserved vegetables smelt of dead fish.

Right from day one the prisoners split into two distinct groups: those who wanted to escape to Langkawi island five kilometres south across the sea in Malaya, and those who were too old or too frightened, or not prepared to take any further risks.

Sor had been part of an original escape committee formed at Bang Kwang, which also included two of his former colleagues at the *Daily Mail*, Louis Kiriwat, the editor, and Naval Captain Phraya Saraphai, a contributor. They invited many of their close friends at Ward Six to join their cause. Sor's closest friend and confidante, Prince Sithiporn, a man he respected highly, was also asked to join, but asserted that at 60 he was too old and did not want to be a burden to the group. After much soul-searching, Sor also decided

not to join the escape group, even though he was one of the early planners.

On a full moon night, day twenty-nine, five prisoners decided to make their escape to Langkawi by boat, led by Captain Phraya Saraphai. The other four were Louis Kiriwat, Sor's old colleague, Colonel Phraya Suraphan, Chalam Liamphetchrat, a lawyer who was also a keen astrologer and selected the auspicious date for their escape, and Kuhn² Asaniratakarn, a railway engineer. It was a sad moment for Sor when they made their farewells on the beach. They had worked, laughed and suffered together for so long.

Why did Sor decide to stay on? He later admitted that he suffered great inner conflict at the time. The main reason he rejected the idea was from his mother, Gaysorn, who implored him with two simple words, "Don't go". She had communicated to him from Satun on the mainland where she was staying in order to be near Sor. Gaysorn was a practical woman and she was concerned for her son's safety. She also realised that a regular income from the dictionary was the most important priority. After all, Sor was the only breadwinner in the family. He was supporting both his younger brother and sister at university.

Sor also chose to stay in order to complete the unfinished dictionary. He felt a moral obligation to his publisher and subscribers to finish the work. Sor also realised that should his escape come to the attention of the authorities, Phraya Nibhon's printing press would certainly be shut down. After all, how could the government tolerate a book written by a political fugitive and allow it to be published, even if it was just a dictionary? Sor had also received royalties amounting to several thousand baht, thanks to his loyal subscribers. He could never let them down. Sor's friend and mentor Prince Sithiporn fully supported Sor's decision to stay on. He told Sor that the dictionary would be his gift to future generations.

2 A minor royally granted title, not to be confused with "Khun", Mr.

Those who had made the decision to remain on the island responded with a conscious effort to rebuild their lives. Over the next few weeks they set about improving their living conditions by first building new living quarters, decent kitchens and clean latrines. Fortunately, fresh water was freely available from the many streams on the island. Prince Sithiporn put his heart and soul into the land, making the earth more arable and eventually produced enough vegetables and fruit to keep everyone healthy. The prince became the spiritual leader of the former inmates of Ward Six and continually boosted their morale. He treated Sor like a son and uplifted his spirits, which were now at a low point after the departure of his friends for Langkawi.

It was difficult to work on his dictionary under these trying conditions. Sor was missing his privileged status at Bang Kwang and pining for Sompong, his newly wedded wife. Since he was not a religious person and he did not believe in God, he did not seek holy guidance in prayer or spiritual meditation like many other prisoners. Instead, Sor took solace in his work, and through sheer determination and strength of character, Sor was soon able to return to his "Life's Work." He hired the common prisoners to build a separate hut for his workplace and designed a new desk. He started to take special care of his personal hygiene and appearance. He never allowed himself to become demoralised. He was always well-groomed and he made sure that even his threadbare clothes – white shirt and Chinese silk trousers – remained impeccable and well-laundered. His hair was always combed and he got one of the common prisoners to give him regular haircuts. He always made sure he felt good about himself.

By June 1940, Sor reached the letter "Z". The giant library edition dictionary was finished at last. It ran to 4,000 pages, 1,600 more than was originally conceived. He could start work right away on a desk size dictionary, a smaller version, for high school students. Now better organised and more mentally alert, he hired some of

his fellow inmates to transcribe his notes onto school exercise pads, paying them 25 satangs for each completed book.

In time, Sor came to prefer life on Tarutao to Bang Kwang. The island was beautiful, the air was fresh and clean, and the surrounding nature was peaceful and quiet. Apart from the constant threat of malaria and other tropical diseases, Sor and his fellow prisoners led a relatively healthy life.

Morale also improved. Everyone chipped in to make prison life as pleasant as possible. Prince Sithiporn, with the help of a group of common prisoners, produced enough vegetables and fruit for the island's consumption, and a surplus was marketed at Satun on the mainland. He also baked bread and cakes on an oven that was sent from the mainland by his wife.

Not to be outdone, Sor started to manufacture soap, essential for someone as particular about personal hygiene as he was. He soon ran out of State Express cigarettes and started experimenting with different kinds of leaves. This was not a huge success. Although Sor was not a gourmet, he enjoyed cooking and he prepared shark fin soup for his friends. He liked mushrooms and created many new recipes. Other inmates joined in the communal spirit and contributed their individual skills, like weaving and basketry. Soon the prison's production earned an income and a small bank was opened. Talo Udang prison was transformed into a self-sufficient commune.

The biggest problem was the lack of adequate medicine, particularly quinine, as malaria was beginning to take its toll on the prison's population. From the mainland in Satun, Sor's mother managed to send over 1,000 quinine tablets which saved many lives.

Visits from friends and family were strictly forbidden, a major aggravation for the inmates, making life on this beautiful island less pleasant. Throughout the period of Sor's imprisonment at Tarutao, his stoic mother patiently remained at Satun on the mainland, so near, yet so very far. Many relatives on the mainland were in dire economic straits and there were cases where prisoners had allowed their wives

to find new husbands who could support them. One even went back to her first husband after the war. Sor was more fortunate than many. He was one of the very few inmates who received a regular income.

In 1942, Siam declared war against the Allies and the war in the Pacific had escalated to Siam, Malaya and Burma. On 8 January, 1942, Bangkok was bombed by the British and the Hua Lampong railway station area was badly hit. Martial law was declared and the prisons came under stricter supervision. Sor's publisher, Phraya Nibhon, was killed during an air raid and Sor's completed portable edition did not get published. Sor kept the unpublished manuscript for another 6 years, carrying it with him wherever he went. It was not published until well after the war, in 1949.

Although they were shut out from the outside world, the prisoners at the Talo Udang camp were fully aware that there was a war going on. They learned from the prison guards that Siam had been invaded and occupied by the Japanese and that Siam had put up a heroic stand against the invaders in the southern peninsula where many soldiers' lives were lost on 8 and 9 December, 1941.³ Being as close as they were to the Malayan border, they frequently heard the sound of heavy artillery and as they cocked their ears to listen, they knew instinctively that it was not the sound of thunder, as the rains never came. Now, there were continuous Japanese sea and air patrols over the thousands of islands that made up the archipelago of the Andaman Sea.

By 1943, the tide of the war was beginning to turn and, aware that the Allies would soon be in control of the Andaman Sea, the government decided to move the political prisoners once again, across the peninsula to Koh Tao, a tiny, uninhabited island, save for a small population of hawksbill turtles, in the Gulf of Siam.

3 See Chapter 5

There were only 55 political prisoners left on Tarutao. The anti-Japanese Free Thai resistance was gaining grass-roots acceptance among the populace and the government was afraid that these highly educated and high-ranking prisoners from Ward Six would join the resistance.

Sor spent the next fifteen months, from April 1943 to July 1944 on Koh Tao Island. Like Tarutao, Koh Tao is also a paradise for holidaymakers, with long stretches of white sandy beach fringed by miles and miles of coconut palm trees, surrounded by clear waters and beautiful coral reefs. Unlike Tarutao though, Koh Tao was much smaller and less fertile, with little freshwater resources. The prisoners were confined to an area of 14 acres, surrounded by a fence. A watchtower with a machine gun emplacement was positioned on top of a hill overlooking the compound, allowing the prison guards to keep constant surveillance. Escape was not a possibility.

The newly arrived prisoners would soon discover that Koh Tao was hell on earth. The Department of Corrections had changed their liberal policy and political prisoners under 60 were forced to work like slaves. They were no longer allowed to wander around freely and at night they were locked up.

There was an acute shortage of essential medicines and American submarine patrols in the gulf curtailed regular delivery of basic foods and supplies. Malnutrition became a major problem and there were more malarial cases than on Tarutao. A combination of exhaustive work, sunstroke, severe hunger and malaria killed six prisoners in the first two months alone. They were literally worked to death.

These harsh conditions were not conducive for Sor to continue his work. He was planning to write the life story of King Rama V, but the lack of research materials, the rough conditions in the prison camp, and severe debilitation made Sor give up writing for the first time in his adult life. He was down to 30 kilos and so weak that his friends stood in for him to do the strenuous task of chopping logs for

firewood. Instead he was assigned to the lighter job of stacking and counting them.

To make up for the lack of intellectual activity, Sor started new experiments with herbal plants, hoping to find a substitute for much needed quinine. Boiling borapet⁴ and shatterstone plants together produced a bitter liquid that increased perspiration and urination and also reduced the fever, but it was no cure for malaria. Sor became chief tester for herbs, leaves, flowers and for just about everything that could be converted to food and medicines. Diced and sun-dried camphor leaves, he discovered, was a poor substitute for tobacco.

Like many thin people, Sor was not one to suffer from acute pangs of hunger. But his hungrier friends ended up eating boiled buffalo hide, pythons, monitor lizards, geckos, and for seafood enthusiasts, the occasional mudskipper. The most sought-after delicacy was turtle meat. Artificial coffee was made by combining red rice grains and borapet leaves.

Accused of participating in a second royal rebellion that failed in 1939, two new prisoners, M.R. Nimit Mongkhon Nawarat and Dr. Chote Kumphan, arrived at Koh Tao from Bang Kwang in late 1943. They were horrified by what they found. They saw prisoners so bony that when they sat down, their kneecaps and elbows protruded from their emaciated bodies. Their bulging eyes popped out from their skeletal sockets. At night they shivered uncontrollably under thread-bare blankets. Koh Tao was not a prison, but a concentration camp.

Dr. Chote was moved to say in his memoirs: "If we were animals we would all have died. Being human made us more resistant and hopeful."

An amnesty for all political prisoners was declared after a change of government in September 1944. By 20 October, the prisoners were put

4 A type of cactus.

on the Bangkok-bound train at Surat station. The news of their release had been broadcast, and overnight the political prisoners became national heroes. Throughout their journey, people came out to greet them at each stop, bringing them food and clothes, and fêted them with garlands.

Sor discovered two things after his long absence. First, that the Siamese hadn't changed at all. They were the same gentle and kind-hearted people that he loved before he went to prison eleven years earlier.

He also discovered that the Thai spelling of his family name had been simplified from "Sveshthaputra" to "Sethaputra" by the Pibul government, who unsuccessfully tried to modernise the Thai alphabet. Sor decided that he would adopt the new, simpler spelling of his name, in keeping with his modest style.

He wanted people to associate him with simplicity and to remember him as a common man, one who loved his fellow human beings, and he did not want to be confused with the wealthier branch of the family that had reverted back to the original spelling. He often boasted about being the "poor relative."

When Sor arrived at Bangkok Noi station, he was greeted by his old friend Manit Vasuwat, who immediately offered him a board directorship at the Sri Krung newspaper and publishing company.

Also at the station, standing out among the throng of friends and well-wishers, despite her petite stature, was a thinner, older but happier Gaysorn, Sor's mother. He broke down and cried.

After ten years, eleven months and twenty days in prison, Sor was exhausted. He took time off to move into his new house and catch up with Sompong, his wife, and their little boy Chaiya, who he had not seen for five years. He joined Dr. Chote, a former Koh Tao inmate, on a rehabilitation program to get back his health. He rested and then started thinking about his next dictionary project.

Production of the manuscript for the library edition of the "New Model English-Siamese Dictionary," from "A" to "T" took

almost five years at Bang Kwang prison. As there were no restrictions on writing at Tarutao, Sor was able to complete the final part to "Z" in less than a year. The portable version took him another year.

The two-volume 4000-page New Model English-Siamese Dictionary was a new kind of dictionary. Previous works were compiled by American missionaries for foreigners wanting to learn Thai. So's "New Model" dictionary was written for Thais wanting to learn English. In the introduction, he wrote that it was to be a "dynamic passport to the English language for native Thai speakers" that "captures the idiomatic, colloquial spoken and written character of English." The New Model Dictionary became the best selling English-Thai dictionary in the last century, including library, desk, school and pocket versions.

In the "L" section of the New Model Dictionary, this is what he wrote to illustrate "labour":

"I did it as a labour of love."

LUANG PIBUL

Full Name: Plaek Pibulsonggram

1897 – 1964

Siam's longest serving prime minister,
who changed its name to Thailand



-3-



ภรรยา
FEMME



ลายเซ็นนามผู้ถือหนังสือเดินทาง
SIGNATURE DU TITULAIRE

P. Khittasanga

และ ภรรยา
ET DE SA FEMME

ลายเซ็นนามเจ้าพนักงาน
ผู้ออกหนังสือเดินทาง
Signature de l'agent
délivrant le passeport :

Phayap Ratanapradit

Previous page: Premier Pibul and Tan Phuying La-Iad attending a mass wedding ceremony in 1944

Above: Rare picture of Lieutenant Pibul's passport before departing for his studies at the Ecole de l'artillerie in France in 1924. Note his signature P. Khittasanga before his name was changed to Pibulsonggram.

2

Pibul's Gold

Midnight, monsoon, 1943. A light drizzle fell on a secluded rice field just outside the village of Taphan Hin, one third of the way to Chiang Mai, where a north-bound freight train had made an unscheduled stop. There, under the cover of darkness, soldiers of the Second Army Division from barracks at Lopburi and Pak Nam Pho, handpicked and sworn to secrecy for this underground mission, were unloading several hundred crates, undetected by Japanese air and land patrols.

The crates were destined to proceed east by the hilly road to Petchabun, on Route 113, along one hundred kilometres of muddy track for three hours, provided they didn't get bogged down by the occasional flash flood, the ever-present sludge and the risk of landslides at Chon Daen, where the road narrows and zigzags before descending into the valley of Petchabun. This clandestine operation had been going on every night for the last three weeks, and there were still 10 more trips to be made before the entire consignment reached Petchabun.

It was one of the most secretive and dangerous road and rail logistics exercise ever undertaken in Thailand during the Second World War – and backbreaking work for the soldiers. Many of them did not know the contents of the crates. Only the officers knew each crate contained 100 gold ingots and called it "Pibul's Gold."

Field Marshal Pibulsonggram, or Pibul as he was known, was the Prime Minister of Thailand, the nation's most famous and influential political figure, and a military man. Thailand was occupied by the Japanese at the time, and technically at war with the Allies. Pibul was performing a difficult balancing act, accommodating the Japanese that had intruded his home while trying to retain the dignity and autonomy of his people during trying war-time circumstances.

On the morning of 7 October, 1943, the Field Marshal woke up before sunrise. At 5 a.m., he boarded a special carriage attached to the northern freight train at Hua Lampong station in Bangkok. The secret journey he was about to undertake was part of a crucial campaign of his premiership and its success was fundamental to his anti-Japanese policy. In preparation for a potential showdown with Japan inside Thailand, he was trying to build a secure base in Petchabun, located in the centre of the country and surrounded by protective mountains, where he could also make sure that the country's gold reserves and national treasures were safely hidden from the Japanese. Pibul had heard that Hitler was stealing French and Dutch works of art and shipping them back to Berlin. This kind of wanton plunder, he thought, must not be allowed to happen here. It was his duty to protect the symbols of state and ensure the continuity of the dynasty after the war.

Indeed, over the next eighteen months, Japan was to demand over 490 million baht from the Thai government coffers, several times in excess of the nation's annual budget.¹ They had already shipped forty million dollars' worth of gold to Tokyo.² The Japanese war chest was running short of cash, and they needed fuel and armaments for their costly battles with the Americans in the Pacific.

1 Direk Jayanama, *Thailand in Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Erdman Verlag, 1970

2 In 1949, President Truman issued special orders to the Japanese government to return the gold to Thailand. Pibul, who was PM at the time, was delighted. (Edwin Stanton, *Brief Authority*, Harper, 1956)

Pibul, however, was particularly determined to protect the sacred symbols of Thailand's history and the revered treasures of the Chakri Dynasty. So that in October 1943, the Emerald Buddha, the kingdom's most important Buddhist image since the 16th century, several stately thrones and royal regalia, and dozens of ceremonial gold and silver swords, were loaded onto this special train. Pibul would supervise this part of "Operation Gold" personally. Nothing could be allowed to go wrong.

Pibul had been preparing for a Japanese invasion as far back as April 1937 when he called upon the entire nation to arm itself in self-defence, because he believed its security and independence were threatened by a conflict that was about to break out between Britain and Japan in their struggle to impose their domination over Southeast Asia. This was broadcast on radio, five years before the outbreak of war in the Pacific. When the British and Japanese governments heard this speech, they lodged official complaints with the Thai government, denying that they were intending to go to war with each other. Both governments also stressed their commitment to respect Thailand's neutrality. Pibul was not assured.

Pibul made further defensive preparations for a Japanese invasion in September 1940, after the powerless Vichy French authorities capitulated to the Japanese forces in Indochina. Maintaining Thailand's policy of neutrality wasn't going to be easy, with the Japanese army right on the nation's doorstep.

Throughout 1941, Pibul was *obsessed* with Thailand's defences and was often away from Bangkok making inspection tours of the border provinces. Convinced that sooner or later the Japanese would strike from French Indochina, he reinforced the Laotian and Cambodian border areas with additional divisions, and in September 1941 passed stringent laws to control Japanese immigration into the country. Too many of them had recently been entering Thailand

posing as tourists, dentists, teachers and merchants, when in fact they were really military intelligence personnel on spying missions. When the war started, they donned army uniforms overnight.

In addition, the Thai Citizens' Duties in Wartime Act was passed by the National Assembly, instructing the populace to help protect the nation's neutrality in case of attack through a scorched earth policy, urging them to destroy crops, livestock, provisions and buildings to prevent them from being used by the enemy.

A massive Japanese military and naval build-up in Indochina in July, 1941, including the establishment of air bases in Tonkin, warships in Haiphong and troopships in Saigon, confirmed to Pibul that a Japanese attack was both inevitable and imminent. Over the next few months, he futilely attempted to convince the Western powers that the Japanese threat from Indochina was real, and to secure military support from Britain and America. On 4 December he informed the British in Malaya that he had sufficient intelligence to believe an attack would come "within the next four days,"³ requesting at the least a promise of support. In a personal communication to Sir Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister, Pibul said he was "certain" an invasion of Thailand was coming soon. Churchill replied that help would not be forthcoming and that Thailand was to "defend herself." Pibul later said that he did not understand how Churchill expected "us to fight the Japanese single-handedly."

In the closing months of 1941 the French garrisons in Indochina were neutralised and the Japanese concentrated their land, air and sea strength in Indochina for their successful onslaughts against British Malaya, Singapore and Hong Kong, American Guam and the Philippines, the Dutch East Indies and independent Thailand.

"The day of infamy"⁴ on 7 December, 1941, when Japanese planes from six aircraft carriers destroyed six battleships and 188

3 MI6, the British Intelligence Service, also knew of the threat of invasion, but they concluded that due to the monsoon "any attack would be impossible before March."

4 President Roosevelt addressing Congress on 8th December, 1941.

aircraft of the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, was also the day when Pibul was faced with the toughest predicament of his life. He had been on an inspection tour in the northeast at the time. At 4 a.m. he was awakened and told that since ten-thirty the previous night, General Adun Adundetcharat, the Deputy Prime Minister, had been trying to reach him with the news that the Japanese ambassador, Teiji Tsubokami, requested that Japanese troops be allowed to pass through Thailand. Adun was given three and a half hours to make up his mind otherwise the Japanese would invade the country.⁵

By 2 a.m. the time limit had expired and the combined Japanese forces invaded the southern peninsula.⁶ Pibul remembered this agonizing moment, the crackling telephone trembling in his hand, as Adun waited for his answer. Like Sweden and Switzerland, Pibul dearly wanted Thailand to remain neutral. His first reaction was to put up a fight, but he knew that it was hopeless for the tiny Thai army to resist the Japanese who had years of hardened battle experience in China. He remembered facing the arrogant Japanese ambassador, squat and bespectacled, with his threatening demands after he quickly flew back to Bangkok. Britain and the US had already admitted they could not help after he had requested their assistance. He also learned that the Japanese, as he suspected they would, had also landed at Kota Bharu in Malaya, and was heavily bombarding Singapore. He wondered whether Ambassador Tsubokami realised how much contempt he had for the Japanese on that day.

Pibul had to decide whether to fight the Japanese to the last man, at the risk of laying the country to waste, or surrender and allow the invading Japanese army to seize Thailand, ending 700 years of independence.

He chose to do neither.

5 A ridiculous request. The Japanese would have attacked anyway, *whatever* Pibul's response, as they did at Pearl Harbor. The Japanese navy *had already set sail* on 26 November with clear instructions to attack Pearl Harbor, Malaya, Singapore, Philippines, Hong Kong and Thailand on the same day.

6 One of the battles in the southern peninsula is the subject of Chapter 5.

Right up to the last week in November 1941, Pibul was hoping for Allied assistance. Had help from Britain and America actually materialized, Pibul could very well have been tempted to join them. Just before the invasion, the British Minister to Thailand, Sir Josiah Crosby, reported to Sir Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, that "in the absence of a promise from Britain, Siam might be compelled to adopt the role which Denmark is now playing vis-à-vis Germany." In other words, military occupation of neutral Denmark, *without* collaborating with the enemy.⁷

Between December 8 and 9, the Thai forces initially put up a courageous defence of Thailand's southern peninsula, often resorting to hand-to-hand combat, earning respect from their Japanese invaders for bravery and tenacity. Well over 250⁸ Japanese and 150 Thai soldiers were killed in action before Pibul ordered a ceasefire. He wanted to prevent the country from becoming a battlefield.

Meanwhile, Churchill had been too proud almost to the point of arrogance to heed Pibul's warnings about a likely Japanese landing on Thailand and Malaya. The British base in Singapore had strengthened its seaward defensive batteries expecting an attack by the Japanese navy from the south, not a Japanese army invasion across the Malayan mainland from the north. Britain was caught completely unprepared. Her guns were uselessly pointing in the wrong direction. After two months of fighting the Japanese in Malaya and Singapore, the British unconditionally surrendered 85,000 Commonwealth troops in Singapore on 15 February, 1942. This was the most ignominious defeat in British history.

Pibul's next decision was considerably more difficult. The Japanese presented Thailand with a number of unacceptable propositions. The first was for complete political, military and economic cooperation. The second was for Thailand to become a

⁷ *Siam: The Crossroads*, Sir Josiah Crosby, Hollis and Carter, London, 1945.

⁸ The Japanese got rid of their dead bodies by burning or burying them before the enemy could make a body count, so their exact losses were never known throughout the war.

full partner with Japan, Germany and Italy as an Axis power. The third was a mutual defence pact without Axis participation, and the fourth to urgently allow Japanese troops the right of transit through Thailand to attack Burma and Malaya.

Pibul realised that a strategic course of action was needed quickly, based on a number of realities:

1. The enemy was already at the gates, yet the Thai army, outnumbered and outgunned, was still under his command.
2. Despite the assurance of the British minister, Sir Josiah Crosby, that "England will help if Siam will fight,"⁹ British help did not materialize, and Thailand was therefore under no obligation to assist Britain defend her Burmese and Malayan colonies.
3. Thailand's strategic location was important for Japan's military conquest of Southeast Asia.
4. Having lost all her alliances in Asia, Japan badly wanted our friendship, a fellow traveller that had never been colonized.
5. All options considered, it would seem that geopolitically they needed us more than we needed them.

In an address to the nation on 10 December, 1939, Pibul had stated that "we must be determined to defend our neutrality" at all costs. Becoming a full partner with Japan would have compromised that position. Partnership was therefore out of the question. Pibul realized that Japanese passage through Thailand was their most pressing and strategically important demand. To temporarily keep them at bay, this request was granted immediately.

In allowing the Japanese to pass through the country, Thailand was perceived as a friend in need and avoided becoming a Japanese colony, unlike Korea, the east coast of China, Taiwan and Manchukuo.

9 Thailand and World War II, Direk Jayanama, Silkworm Books 2008.

While accusations of being a traitor or collaborator were often leveled at Pibul during and immediately after the war, he had always been worried about which side to take for the survival of Thailand's sovereignty. During the confusing years before Pearl Harbor, the French supported Pétain and the Vichy government willingly joined the Nazis, Britain seemed about to be invaded, the Italians¹⁰ and the Soviets¹¹ were allied with Hitler, Japan had brought China to her knees and the Americans were determined to stay out of the war. Surrounded by powerful rooks on this global chessboard, Thailand was a weak pawn indeed.

Even though Pibul was later forced to declare war on Britain and America to appease the Japanese, Thai sovereignty remained intact and the government under Pibul was allowed complete freedom of action in all her internal affairs, with the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the government remaining autonomous throughout the war, never to be controlled by the Japanese.

Allied prisoners captured by the Thai army, for example, remained in Thai prison camps and were "well treated, well fed, and well housed"¹², unlike the British, Australian and Dutch prisoners-of-war who were worked to death on the Death Railway.¹³

Moreover, Pibul was able to prevent the crushing blow of disarmament by the Japanese. At no time during the war was the Thai army ever placed under Japanese command, unlike the armistice signed between France and Germany on 22 June, 1940 when French forces were totally disarmed and three-fifths of the country was surrendered to German control.

Of course, Pibul continually had to enter into onerous agreements with the Japanese, but based on the sound principles

10 In 1936, Mussolini, the Italian dictator, joined Nazi Germany and formed the Rome-Berlin Axis.

11 In 1939, Joseph Stalin, the Soviet leader, signed a nonaggression pact with Hitler.

12 Sir Geoffrey Thompson, Britain's ambassador in Bangkok, 1947.

13 See Chapter 10.

of *Realpolitik*, he had no intention whatsoever of honouring them. Alliance, if need be, he decided, rather than subjugation.¹⁴

Indeed, in the years that followed the Japanese invasion of December 1941, the Japanese, militarists at heart, would misinterpret Pibul's leadership as being compatible with their hegemonist aims of conquering Asia. They couldn't have been more mistaken. While Pibul was "outwardly posturing as the pro-Japanese puppet Prime Minister"¹⁵, he was secretly having a dialogue with Free China's 93rd Division Commander at the Lam River on the border of Burma and China. As a token of Thai friendship, General Lu was presented with a beautifully engraved hunting rifle, a personal gift from Pibul. Pibul was making sure that the back door remained open for Allied support should the Japanese decide to conduct an air and ground war against his base in Petchabun. Pibul's peaceful contacts with the Chinese through the Kong Thap Phayap (Northwest Army) whose ostensible mission was to protect the Japanese northern flank was one of the most well-kept secret operations of the war.

Pibul well knew that there was an active Free Thai resistance movement in the country, yet he did nothing to stop it. Instead, he facilitated the resistance's activities by tacitly allowing the movement's build-up in the northeast without reporting it to the Japanese. "Pibul's decision not to betray the resistance movement to the Japanese saved the life of the resistance movement."¹⁶ By feigning obedience to the Japanese, Pibul also allowed Thailand to become the Allies' best listening post in Asia.

Thus Pibul's choices conformed with his goal from the outset of the conflict. Before M.R. Seni Pramoj left Bangkok in 1941 to take

14 "Being part of the British Empire was no guarantee of safety. Indeed had Burma been an independent state, she would have suffered much less. The Siamese, for instance, had got through with very little damage." *The Last and First in Burma*, Maurice Collis, Faber and Faber, 1956. The Burma campaign was the longest land campaign of the war.

15 *The Thai Resistance Movement During the Second World War*, John Haseman, Chalermnit Press, 1999.

16 Ibid.

up his position as Minister to Washington, D.C., he asked Pibul for clarification on Thailand's foreign policy. "Were we pro-Japanese, pro-English, pro-American or pro-anything? He replied that we were not *pro* any country in particular. We were pro-Thailand."¹⁷

In his full Field Marshal's artillery uniform, his favourite, and highly polished cavalry boots, Pibul strutted jauntily up the Hua Lampong station platform followed by his aide-de-camp, a batman and three army officers. The distant sound of chanting monks mingling with the hissing steam of the locomotive could just be discerned in the early morning silence. The train driver was stoking the engine up with coal for the long journey north to Taphan Hin.

As Pibul and his small party approached a special carriage, the chanting got louder. They boarded the train. Nine chanting monks were seated in a lotus position on both sides of a pedestal in the centre of the carriage, at their head a senior abbot, leading the Buddhist incantations. Pibul prostrated himself at the base of the pedestal in reverence and kowtowed three times, and again prostrated before each monk in turn. Standing vertically on the pedestal on a gold ceremonial tray¹⁸ was a gilded teak box measuring one metre by one-fifty. Inside was the Emerald Buddha, the palladium of the Chakri, the dynasty that has ruled Thailand since 1782.

Realising the implication of this risky mission, Pibul was, for a brief moment, overcome with emotion. Relocating the Emerald Buddha was tantamount to moving five centuries of Thai history. As a military officer who helped lead the 1932 revolution, Pibul himself had played an important role in transitioning the country from absolute to constitutional monarchy that year. In the 1930s, after rising to become prime minister of the country, his government was often at loggerheads with the royalist factions who distrusted his

17 M.R. Seni Pramoj's memoirs

18 "Phaan" in Thai.

intentions and saw him as an autocratic leader bent on undermining royal institutions and power. Moving the royal regalia might be unacceptable to some in Bangkok. Meanwhile, the current king, His Majesty King Ananda Mahidol, only a minor at the time, was living abroad in Switzerland. Did Pibul even have the moral right to do this? A decisive, determined and a very Buddhist person, Pibul was convinced that protecting the Emerald Buddha was the right thing to do. He would *personally* accompany this most sacred icon to its new resting place in Petchabun.

Twenty other wagons in the railway convoy were stacked with forty crates containing the royal regalia received by each successive Chakri king on his coronation, including swords, jewelled slippers, gilded thrones and other ceremonial items dating back to the first Chakri ruler. And of course, there were also the gold ingots that needed to be kept safe. Each wagon was guarded by a platoon of four trusted soldiers. The station platform at that time of the morning was quiet and eerily empty; public access was forbidden. There was a light mist in the moist air.

Pibul and his party settled down at the front end of the carriage, which was converted into a private suite. At precisely 5.17 a.m. the train slowly chugged out of the station. After Nonthaburi, it picked up speed, and Pibul was at last left alone with his thoughts. He pressed his palms together in thankful reverence as the train passed the town where he was born 46 years before. As always, he was moved by the early glow of the sun, as it started to glimmer on the horizon's rice fields, an emerald green at this time of the morning. Glad to leave behind the hurly-burly of politics in Bangkok, he sat back and relaxed for the first time in months.

Pibul had always been at his happiest when he went on inspection tours of the provinces, and he felt particularly comfortable and secure when travelling by train. This route was a familiar one. Pathumthani, Bang Pa-In, Ayudhya... he passed the towns he knew so well. *This country was to fight for*, he was thinking, *and to save from*

her enemies. He reminisced about his days as an army cadet. *The mark of a great soldier is knowing when to apply the iron fist and knowing when to apply the velvet glove.* Pibul recalled his dissertation on one of the Thai army's many powerful strategic principles.

Pibul, or Plaek, as he was then known, was only eighteen when he graduated from the Military Cadet School in Bangkok with honours. He was the top student of his year, the class of 1915, and his superior training officer noticed that this opportunistic but bright and affable young man continually came up with the correct answers, even to the most difficult tactical exercises. He also noticed that during classes Plaek was a master survivor, able to fall on his feet in tight situations every time. Indeed, Plaek always made sure each situation would end in his favour. One day, he was certain, Plaek would come to something.

He also remembered his early career as a junior officer, when life was less complicated. He had taken this very train to Phitsanulok where he was attached to the Artillery Corps. There, he met La-Iad, his future wife, not only the most beautiful girl in the north, but the most intelligent woman he had ever met.

In those days, Pibul was especially diligent, highly ambitious and clever. Clever enough in 1924 to win a government scholarship to further his studies at the prestigious Fontainebleau Ecole de l'artillerie in France. In 1933, back in Thailand as an artillery officer, he used the iron fist to quash the Bovoradej rebellion¹⁹ and made a name for himself outside military circles for the first time. Colonel Pibul became the man of the moment.

The train stopped to take on more troops. He looked out of the window. Aah... Lopburi. He immediately felt at home. He could always count on the 2nd Army at Lopburi. The loyal soldiers here loved and admired him. They would trustingly follow him to the ends of the earth...

¹⁹ See Chapter 1

As the train continued its journey north, its rhythmic motion soothed his nerves, and he began to think about the difficult and eventful year he just had. His decision to relocate the capital to Petchabun was a temporary move to draw the Japanese *away* from Bangkok and to prevent it from being an Allied target should the war escalate the country into a battlefield. This strategy had come to him a few months after Thailand was occupied by the Japanese. He knew that it wouldn't be long before they would find out he was *never* on their side. Throughout 1942 the Field Marshal had shrewdly led the Japanese to believe through his public speeches and ostensibly pro-Japanese policies that he was their ally.

Petchabun was his exit strategy. In early 1943, Pibul had appointed an investigative board of six senior police officers and two army generals assisted by five ministerial-level civil servants to look into the feasibility of building up a new, modern Petchabun, a small town of 3,000, set in a valley surrounded by mountains.

At Petchabun he could establish his military and political base, far from Bangkok and the highly populated central plains, from where he could safely conduct a guerrilla campaign against his true enemy. Petchabun would not only be a secure military command post and a temporary civilian capital, but also a safe hideaway for the Kingdom's treasures. Mountain caves 23 kilometres further north would be difficult for Japanese forces to reach and were not visible from the air by Japanese reconnaissance missions. Meanwhile, Bangkok could safely become an "open city."²⁰

On 11 September, 1943, the board reported to Pibul and the Petchabun project was set into motion. "Operation Gold" could begin. The transportation was planned and executed by the Army Field Forces Headquarters in Petchabun. Within a month, Pibul was able to combine rail and road transportation, an efficient workforce,

20 Paris and Rome were declared "open cities" whereby all defence efforts were abandoned to save the city from unnecessary battle.

the military cover, as well as a suitable cache for the treasure, into *one single operation, in secret*. Pibul was satisfied that so far his campaign was a skilful undercover operation conducted right under the noses of the Japanese army. He was pleased that he had successfully outmanoeuvred them.

What was going to be a bit more difficult was making the move a *political* success with his own government. Except for his closest aides and La-Iad, however, the Petchabun campaign was totally misunderstood by his government. He was even accused of wanting to abandon Bangkok, when all he really intended was to *save* it.

Now, Pibul's train was approaching the transfer rendezvous at Taphan Hin...

After a hearty meal of his favourite green chicken curry and rice, Pibul left the train at 2 a.m. and boarded the army Austin 8 Staff car that would lead the military convoy carrying the Emerald Buddha, the royal treasures, and the gold to their secret destination across the mountains, arriving before daybreak. It had taken two hours to unload hundreds of crates from the train onto the trucks. Apart from one truck that got stuck in the mud, the journey east from the rice fields at Taphan Hin to the valley on the other side of the mountains was relatively uneventful. Fortunately, they did not encounter any Japanese air or land patrols.

As they approached the valley, about 50 kilometres from Petchabun, the dark profile of the mountains towered into view in the early morning light. Pibul was reminded of another strategic principle that he had learned as a cadet:

If you do not understand the terrain of the mountains, forests and hazardous areas, and the dangers that are present, you will not be able to move your troops and engage in war.

The mountains that embraced both sides of the valley placed Petchabun in an ideal defensive position. Seeing this forbidding terrain once again convinced him that he had made the right decision.

After a series of hairpin bends, the convoy reached the fertile plantations of Ban Hua Na at the foot of the mountain and continued its journey north to the town of Petchabun, along the valley road and the rapids of Pa Sak River, on Route 21, today called Sammaki Chai²¹ road, Pibul's *nom de guerre*, in his honour. Fortunately, it was no longer raining.

He would have liked to stop at the town of Petchabun to inspect the public works in progress, but that could wait. He was anxious to get to the cave. *His cave*. Pibul ordered the precious convoy to proceed without delay a few kilometres north to Ban Boong Nam Tao and the entrance of the cave. The most important journey of his life was nearly over.

With a sudden rush of adrenalin, Pibul leapt out of the car and ran up the 250 steps, two at a time, that led to the cave entrance. His aides followed quickly, barely able to keep up with him. His heart was pounding, partly from the strenuous climb, but mainly from anticipation and excitement. He had long dreamed of this moment. Deep inside the cave he stopped at the niche he was looking for. He fell to his knees in prayer and told his aide-de-camp: "This is where the Emerald Buddha must rest."

One of the elderly villagers, at the time a boy of 10, recalls those eventful forty nights in October, 1943. He remembers soldiers – hundreds of soldiers stripped down to a *pakama*²² loincloth, their bodies gleaming with sweat – unloading the crates in silence and carrying them to the top of the hill, 20 metres and 250 steps above the level of the road. Many local farmers and teenage boys were also pressed into service, helping the soldiers on the ground to

21 Victorious in unity.

22 Traditional mulicoloured loincloth for men, folded in such a way as to fit like modern briefs.

complete this brutal work while the officers stood guard and directed operations. The soldiers and workers were stripped to their *pakama* to reduce the temptation to steal the treasures and to obviate the necessity of making body searches. They had to work quickly before being discovered by the Japanese air patrol that routinely flew over Petchabun at around 9 a.m.

By 4 February, 1944, mission "Operation Gold" was accomplished. The gold, the royal treasures and the Emerald Buddha were all safely cached away in the caves. The entrance to the cave was sealed off and the steps were heavily guarded. The protective concrete bunkers and fortifications that lined the stairway were so well built that today they are still standing.

Unfortunately for Pibul, however, he did not have the opportunity to fulfil his anti-Japanese campaign through the Petchabun project. In July 1944, two of his bills in the National Assembly were defeated and the Field Marshal was forced to resign his premiership.²³

One of these bills dealt with the establishment of the temporary capital in Petchabun. Because of the campaign's secretive nature, when called upon to explain what the plan was all about, Pibul was not able to publicly defend this bill in Parliament, without giving the game away to the Japanese. The opposition in Parliament did not understand Pibul's intentions and accused him of wanting to abandon Bangkok.

The second bill, to establish a Buddhist sanctuary of peace and safety in the hills of Saraburi, the Buddhaburi Monthon, for Thai civilian refugees fleeing from the Japanese army, should Siam become a war zone, was also defeated.

The author John McNally²⁴ wrote: "His greatest hope had become his greatest failure – the military base upcountry where he

23 Curiously for a dictator, Pibul never ruled by decree, and could have easily dissolved Parliament. He never headed a government without a parliament.

24 In his book *Dragon in Paradise*, Doubleday, page 201.

had planned to secretly concentrate enough army personnel to resist the Japanese.” Ironically, the very action that Pibul took to protect Thailand’s sovereignty and preserve the royal capital was precisely the one that brought him down. He retired to his farm without demur, satisfied that the nation’s treasures were safe.

On 23 April, 1946, after two years, two months and twenty days, the Emerald Buddha was safely back at the temple of Wat Phra Keo in Bangkok, and “Pibul’s Gold” and the royal treasures were restored to the nation, intact.

After the war ended, the national treasures’ safe journey home was far less dramatic. There was no longer any threat from a Japanese attack. It was a formal caravan procession to the railway siding at Taphan Hin where the train was waiting, attended by officials from the Royal Household and the Prime Minister’s Office, under the protection of the army, with continued pomp and ceremony in Bangkok. When the Emerald Buddha was carefully lifted from its secret hiding place before travelling back to Wat Phra Keo, it was blessed by the Supreme Patriarch’s emissary, Phra²⁵ Chantrsri Chantateepo, who subsequently became Chief Abbot Phra Udomyanmolee at Wat Pho Somporn in Udorn. It was certainly the most devout ceremony he had ever conducted. He often recounted this unforgettable spiritual experience to his acolytes in Udorn. *How many abbots in the country had the unique opportunity to perform prayers for the nation’s most sacred Buddha image?* he would proudly ask. It was a humbling moment.

Today, the cave in Petchabun is popularly known as Tam Ruesee Sombad, the “Treasure Cave.” The locals are proud it played such an important role in the Second World War. Several Buddha images have been placed there, and prayers and offerings are made

25 The formal address for a Buddhist monk.

by the devout. The local authorities are trying to promote Tam Ruesee Sombad as a tourist attraction, but outside the province of Petchabun, little is known of its historic significance. Until Pibul's heroic journey is given the recognition it deserves, the Treasure Cave will remain a vague footnote in the annals of the Second World War, and at best, a local legend.