

The Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand Magazine

First Quarter 1993

Dateline

• BANGKOK •



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Dateline
• BANGKOK •

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Phnom Penh Post

Cambodia's independent newspaper

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CONTRIBUTORS

Dateline Bangkok, the FCCT's quarterly magazine, welcomes story or photo essay contributions from our journalist and associate members. Please contact Margo Towie on 215 4685. Payment is in FCCT chit books.

FRONT COVER

The Dalai Lama was one of the eight Nobel Peace Prize laureates who descended on Thailand in February to campaign for the release of detained Burmese opposition leader and fellow laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi. Photo by Dominic Faulder, Bangkok Bureau.

A Letter From Your President

BY BERTIL LINTNER



Our new FCCT year began with a totally unexpected event: His Holiness the Dalai Lama arrived in Bangkok on his first visit to Thailand in more than 20 years. A virtual avalanche of reporters, photographers and TV crews poured into the clubhouse on 17 February. But, despite the excitement of the moment and the large crowd of reporters and curious onlookers, the event was one of the best-organised and least disorderly of the many encounters which the Dalai Lama had with the media during his visit here. For this, we are grateful and we thank all the reporters who were present on this historic occasion for their remarkable self-discipline.

The Dalai Lama was one of the eight Nobel Peace Prize laureates who descended on Thailand in February to campaign for the release of detained Burmese opposition leader and fellow laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi. Perhaps predictably, the Burmese government just sneered at the attempt to pressure them into releasing her - but the Dalai Lama's visit to Thailand caused a diplomatic stir: the Chinese protested twice to the government in Bangkok for admitting the Dalai Lama to Thailand. We had also felt the heat when, prior to the arrival of the Dalai Lama, Chinese embassy officials had discreetly asked us to remove a picture of His Holiness hung on the wall behind the podium for more than a year.

But the FCCT is a professional press club. We want to listen to anyone who is of interest to the media. Bill Clinton, Deng Ziaoping, Khin Nyunt, Brian Mulroney, Khun Sa and Pol Pot are all most welcome to address us: we are journalists, pure and simple. All the photos decorating our walls were taken by FCCT members and they are there because they are of media interest, not as icons of support for any cause. The FCCT represents correspondents, not governments or their detractors.

Our desire to be professional does not stop here. 1992 was a good year for the FCCT with more interesting programs and more members than ever before. Documentaries were introduced every Saturday and Dateline Bangkok, our quarterly magazine, went full colour and looks all the more professional for it. But we on the board do not think this is enough. There remains much to be done to develop the FCCT into a truly professional press club. There are correspondents in Bangkok who pointedly refrain from taking membership and a few long-timers have left us. Many complain the Club is dull and irrelevant. The clubhouse was once packed on Friday nights and it was the vital place to be on weekends. It's painfully clear this is no longer the case. But we have progressed in some areas, while in others growth has failed to progress beyond the early 1980s. This is why certain pubs in Bangkok attract more FCCT members on Friday and Saturday nights than our own club house.

The 1993 board recognises this problem and have decided to act on it. We feel strongly that the Club is needed, after all there is no other of its type in Thailand. As an initial step, a number of members have taken on the responsibility of maximising the Club as a venue for exhibitions for our photographer

members work with the added bonus of improving the ambience.

The first exhibition will be held in May when Philip Blenkinsop will hand his excellent pictures of the May 1991 confrontation between pro-democracy activists and military on the streets of Bangkok. Philip's skill as a photographer was recognised internationally this year. He was awarded the Golden Eye Medallion, the third prize in this year's general news story division of the prestigious World Press Photo Foundation awards, for a series of photos. Congratulations Philip.

Long-time FCCT member Khun Dumras Radjanapiches has done a fantastic job over the years finding us videos for our Monday night film programs. Commercial video parlours, they say, look at his selection before deciding what to show. We've decided to improve the technical quality of shows by installing a laser-disk player, which we hope all members will appreciate.

Wednesday night programs, under Khun Panadda Lertlum-Ampai, Khun Teeranat Karnjanauksorn and Paul Handley's regime, will be further improved with timely videos and well-composed panels. And even if we can't expect people of the Dalai Lama and Japan Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa's stature every month, we can aim to catch an increasing number of dignitaries and personalities for special functions.

From our modest stature, we aspire to continue building an ever better FCCT. But we can't possibly achieve our goals without your help, your support and, above all, your participation.

Bertil Lintner
1993 FCCT President

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Club Highlights



Photo Captions
 1 The 1992 Club Executive with Japan's Prime Minister.
 2 The Dalai Lama visits the FCCT.
 3 Cambodia rolls toward a May poll.
 4 Club Stalwart Sam Cohen tucks in.
 5 Another international media event at the FCCT.



First quarter 1993 has seen the FCCT's profile take on international dimensions as the venue for the regional policy statement of Japanese Prime Minister, Mr Kiichi Miyazawa and only Thailand press briefing by his Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Coming so early in the year, these two highlights set a tough but inspirational pace for club activities during the rest of 1993. Looking a little further ahead, Cambodia's prospects continue to grab regional

and international attention as the country's battered peace-plan rolls toward a mid-May national election, the first multi-party poll since 1955. Small wonder programs on this war ravaged state and its bitterly opposed political parties have proved immensely popular with members.

The FCCT will continue to focus attention on Cambodia as the momentum of developments gains pace ahead of the election date to provide members with up to the minute commentary from correspondents and experts from the field. Current affairs programs dominated and, as always, they were creatively planned to deliver provocative, entertaining and informative briefings to members.

But to shift focus from the serious to the subliminal, the FCCT's "A Night in the Stars" held similarly strong billing with one of Thailand's leading astrologers, Wisara Pranomkorn, on stage to read members fortunes. We may consider ourselves to be beyond superstition but your correspondent has it on good authority that at least one second opinion was sought by a recipient that fateful night of a fortune not in keeping with preferred expectations.

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Club Highlights

On par was the 1993 executive committee inaugural dinner and dance on 27 February, where newly elected president Bertil Lintner was able to attract a troupe of Shan dancers who live in Chiang Rai to visit Bangkok to perform at the event. Amex provided generously in the form of cash sponsorship, and door prizes - contributions without which the event would have been far less memorable.

Moving to this year's executive, those who attended the annual general meeting on 29 February will know that Bill Clinton's campaign to capture the US presidential paled in comparison to Bertil Lintner's

ascendancy to the helm of the FCCT. A Burma-watcher, Lintner and almost all of his board (sic) were elected unopposed, Burma style.



MOVING TO THIS YEAR'S EXECUTIVE, THOSE WHO ATTENDED THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING ON 29 FEBRUARY WILL KNOW THAT BILL CLINTON'S CAMPAIGN TO CAPTURE THE US PRESIDENTIAL PALED IN COMPARISON TO BERTIL LINTNER'S ASCENDANCY TO THE HELM OF THE FCCT.



Photo captions

- 1 "Here's a few tips on foreign policy," former PM Chatchai Choonhaven tells deputy PM Boonchu, with Japan's PM Miyazawa listening in.
- 2 "It's like this, he still thinks he's PM," Tan Lian Choo confides.
- 3 "They think I'm still PM," beams Khun Chatchai.

On matters of membership, the Japanese Embassy became the first diplomatic deputation to take out corporate status with the FCCT, a trend we hope will be followed by other embassies. The move followed the very successful, high profile luncheon hosted by the FCCT in conjunction with the Association of Thai Journalists for Japanese Prime Minister Mr Kiichi Miyazawa. Mr Miyazawa's luncheon address, unveiling Japan's major regional policy initiative of creating an Indochina reconstruction fund, was broadcast live to Japan and grabbed headlines world wide. His selection of the FCCT as host of the occasion significantly raised the club's profile regionally and internationally.



AS LONG AS NEITHER ONE OF YOU
NEED TO SAY A WORD
TO SHARE A TWO-WAY CONVERSATION...

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Club Highlights

Similarly, the visit to Thailand of the Dalai Lama and seven other Nobel Peace Prize laureates and the choice of the FCCT as the only venue in which they collectively met with media highlights increasing recognition of the club's role as a gathering point for news men and women. As well as the Dalai Lama, the Nobel laureates included South African Bishop Desmond Tutu, Northern Irish peace campaigners Mairead Maguire and Betty Williams, Adolpho Esquivel from Argentina, former Costa Rican President Oscar Arias and a representative of Amnesty International, which was awarded the peace prize in 1977.



Photo captions

- 1 "Really, you can stand up now Bertil!"
- 2 There was a wall of cameras.
- 3and a lot of scribbling....
- 4as the Nobel Peace Prize laureates faced the press.
- 5 Recovered, Bertil presents the Dalai Lama with a portrait of fellow laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.





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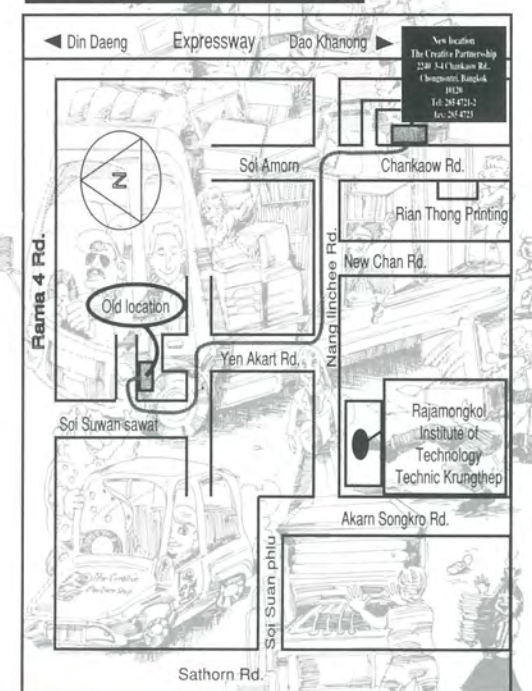
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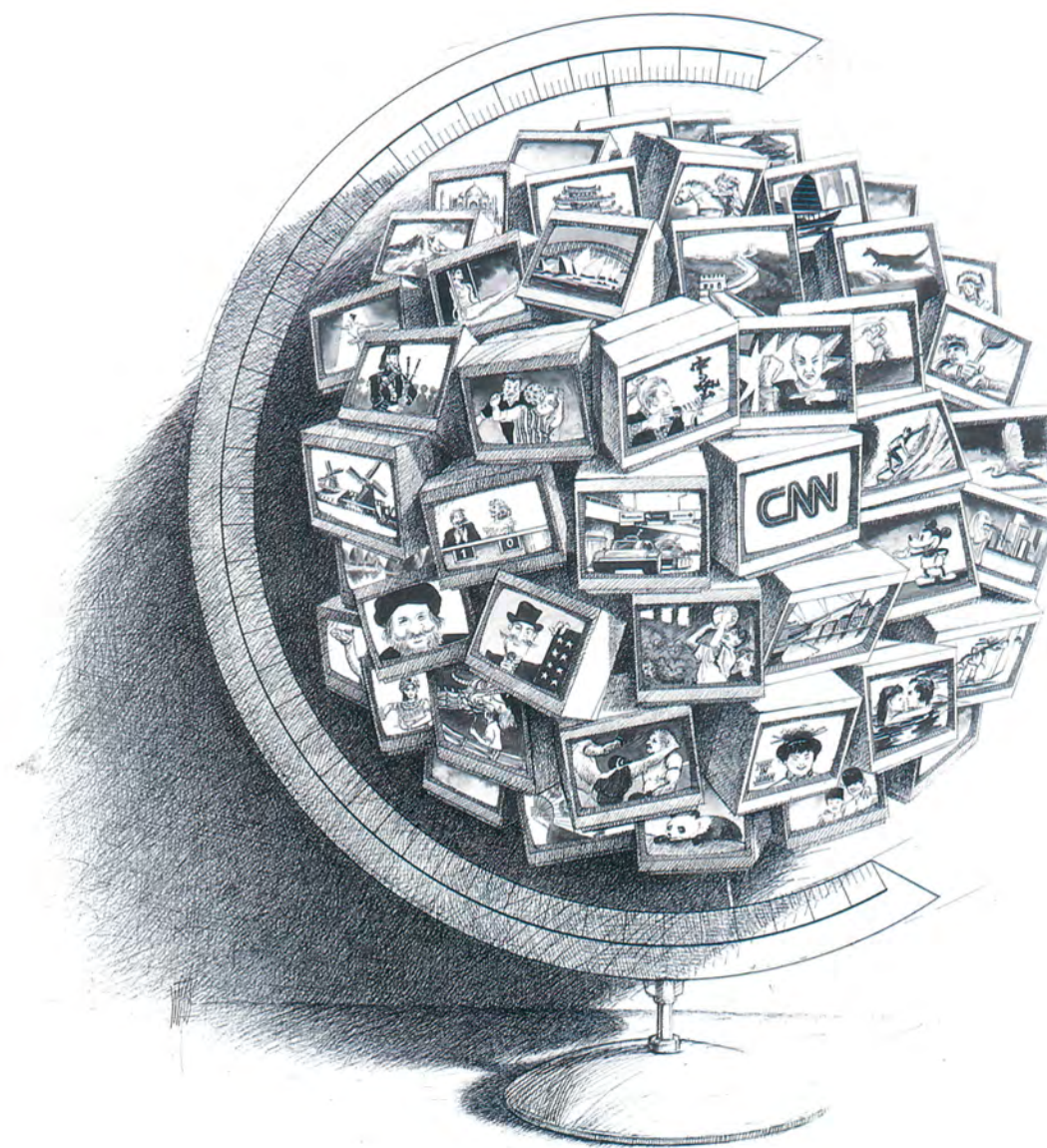
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Bunkers, Breakfast, Grenades and Guerillas

BY PHILIP BLENKINSOP

PHILIP BLENKINSOP RECOUNTS IN WORDS AND ON FILM A SINGLE DAY IN THE BATTLE BETWEEN KAREN AND BURMANS TO WIN CONTROL OF TWEPAWEJO, KNOWN TO THE WEST AS SLEEPING DOG HILL.



You sleep here Brother." Two of us slide down through a narrow opening into what reminded me only too much of those ancient burial sites you always see artist's impressions of in National Geographic, powdered rocks falling with us and clawing at our throats as we tried to breathe. On the wall, like a crass duck flying awkwardly across the wall of a tasteless suburban living room was an M-16 assault rifle with a telescopic sniper's sight, lovingly wrapped in cloth to keep the ever present dust and dirt out of its easily jammed breech. "Tomorrow we throw a grenade at Burmese bunker", Lieutenant Saw Prince had the

omnipresent grin of a man who has had so many close calls that he now believed he was untouchable. He made me nervous. Dinner was day old rice and salty fish-paste, for the 68th time that year and besides, the ideas of getting picked off by a hidden hand and a star-light scope to become another stroke on a shooter's tally sheet didn't appeal. Sleep was the obvious choice, especially as our flickering friend had a voracious appetite for what remained of the thickening air. Black with just the pungent smell of rotting faeces for company. Saw Prince was on hand bright and early to pull us from the cold dead womb. Dreams are always more vivid when punctuated by rifle-

cracks. I didn't need to look at the breakfast menu to know what culinary delights awaited my dry palate and Prince thrust a carbine at me before I could find anything I could chew on in my mouthful of cold fish-paste. "We go now, throw grenade at Burmese bunker."

I swallowed the paste, handed him back the rifle and picked up my Leicas. The disappointment shadowed his smile only briefly and we were off. I found out later that some wise-guy had told him that I was ex-Special Forces and was tired of killing people for a living. He honestly expected me to take out a Burmese bunker single handed. Twenty seconds later,

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Bunkers, Breakfast, Grenades and Guerillas



charging back up ankle-high trenches, cameras smacking against one another as Burmans tried desperately to riddle us with holes, he probably realised his error and I dived head-first over a reinforced dirt wall onto several guffawing Karen guerillas. God, is it really only eight ayem? The rush of the first recoilless-rifle round soon put an end to life above ground, and with it came the promise of the first of several infantry assaults on our positions. Our heads were to pound to the constant barrage of mortar, artillery, recoilless, RPG and M-79 rounds and small-arms fire until the day finally died and faded into a cordite fog. We heard them coming up the slope. Laa Er flicked his M-16 off safety and shifted his weight to rush out of the bunker to repel them at the very instant a burst of the most beautiful, brighter-than-daylight orange lit up our interior, knocking the 23 year-old off balance

and back onto my legs. We forgot momentarily about the advancing Burmese and watched as that red-life oozed slowly from his hand like brackish water from a well long-since dried up. The colour drained from his cheeks as he apologised for not having a picture of his wife to show me. He had married her only weeks before in an area of lowlands to the South and had not had time to have one taken before being called on to take the place of a fallen comrade. I patched him up, along with Dave's help who had slithered into my fox hole earlier, with a field dressing and a bandage that was filthy by the time we had wrapped up his swelling hand. He was lucky. Unable to hold his rifle, he was now of no use to his commanding officer and would not be one of those unlucky men cursing and screaming for more ammunition when Burmese troops stormed over the top five days later slaughtering every Karen in sight. My

Top Shot



from page 18

fingertips bled as we clawed our way frantically back up Twepawejo through smouldering fires to where last night's bunker was now little less than a sand-pit. We were on our own now. No men could be spared to guide us down a sheer face lit barely by a crescent-moon the Karen call the Devil's Grin. Our hosts had weathered over 1500 high-powered explosive rounds during the course of the day's battle and their only reward was the promise of an extra eight meals of cold rice and fish-paste before meeting their maker.

© Blenkinsop 1992; excerpt
from Revelation Magazine



Journalist's Profile

Andrew Drummond is correspondent for Associated Newspapers, Evening Standard, Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday - London.



BY ANDREW DRUMMOND

Just a few months after winning the West Australian Canon Photojournalist of the Year Award, Bangkok-based photographer Philip Blenkinsop, 29, has been named a prize winner in the World Press Photo Awards.

His first award in West Australia was for a series of pictures taken in Cambodia, Thailand and Burma. In the World Press Photo Awards Philip Blenkinsop received third prize, a Golden Eye Medallion, for his photo essay "Crackdown on Pro-Democracy Movement" in May last year. First and second prizes went to Paul Lowe of Network Photographers UK for "Somalia" and Ken Oosterbroek of Star, South Africa, for his "Trains of Terror". Philip emigrated from England as a child to Perth, Australia, where he worked on the Sunday Times before moving to The Australian in Sydney. Now four years in Asia, Philip works for a wide range of newspapers and magazines in England and Australia both on fast news and his own long worked out projects.



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A Precarious Presence in Cambodia

BY KEN STIER

CAMBODIA WAS STILL YEARS FROM APPEARING ON THE SCREEN OF A BICYCLE-RIDING PAPER ROUTE BOY SLINGING NEWSPAPERS ONTO DEWY DOORSTEPS FOR THE CONTENTED CITIZENS OF FALMOUTH, MASSACHUSETTS IN THE EARLY 1960S.



Cambodia's independent newspaper

Far from this (Norman) Rockwellian beginning, Michael G. Hayes and his able partner and wife, Kathleen, find themselves the proprietors of a paper for a much rowdier community, but only "sticks and stones" would shake them from their new found calling - running the Phnom Penh Post. But aware that the post-United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia era looms, it could well be bombs and bullets delivering the warning that the country is not ready for a truly independent press.

"As long as we are not harrassed, shot or intimidated out of town, we will be here as long as we can be," says Michael. The Post has always had an important guardian angel in Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who was quick to grant his royal permission to the project, even if hatched by an American once employed by the Asia Foundation.

A keen reader of the press, the Prince has dubbed The Post the "Le Monde of Cambodia" and often fires off clippings, complete with scribbles in the margins, as missives of his own. But the Prince's patronage may not be enough. Observes Hayes:

"If it weren't for the UN, we might have had to close down...and with UNTAC gone there will be much less protection for the country. It all depends on the next government".

In less magnanimous days, even grand-daddy Sihanouk was known to have snuffed out press lights of which he did not approve. The Post was awarded an open-ended license from the State of Cambodia (SOC) Council of Ministers and the Phnom Penh municipality, permission that is expected to be honoured by the next government. But State of Cambodia ministry of defence minions were probably unhappy to read several Post reports - sourced from UNTAC's Indonesian battalion - alleging their troops were shelling their very own villages as part of a campaign to cast blame on the Khmer Rouge. Nor was Ung Sami, SOC provincial chief and Cambodia People's Party chairman in Battambang likely to have been pleased with reports in February linking him to political violence. How The Post's upstart presence sits with the powers that be is hard to judge but potentially dangerous to mislead.

"There might be all kinds of things we could get away with but we might have already made enemies who will just abide their time and then later line us up and . . .," says Hayes, 40, quickly gone silver from the temples since moving from Bangkok last April.

Hayes says Post stalwart and Far Eastern Economic Review Cambodian correspondent Nate Thayer has a special knack for winning over the news-makers. "Nate likes to piss people off," he says baldly. Whatever

readers think of The Post, it attracts plenty of "letters to the editor". These, and other lengthy contributions, have given the paper a quasi-academic density which Hayes says will probably lighten up as it reaches out to a broader Khmer readership.

"For the long-term survival of the paper we will have to go bilingual and we have the computer technology to do it, we just don't have the people," Hayes notes.

Ker Muthit and Mang Channo are The Post's only two Khmer reporters, although Chap Narith is another key staffer. Ker spent six years studying Soviet journalism in Moscow while Mang was recruited from the local SPK news service.

Both recently benefitted from an international journalism training program held in Phnom Penh. Other journalistic staffers are Irishman Kevin Barrington, a refugee from the rival English language Cambodia Times newspaper, and managing editor Chris Burslem, previously with The Nation and an occasional UPI stringer. The Post also has a host of correspondents, which Hayes says gives it additional panache. "But journalists need to be watched like hawks," says gatekeeper Hayes, the one who hears about all the deficiencies in his publication.

"One aspect of the job I hadn't anticipated is that I would have to give so many interviews to the press,"

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A Precarious Presence in Cambodia

says Hayes, adding that he lost count at 40.

His biggest gripe, however, is that "no-one writes honestly about the other paper", which he accuses of hyperbole in its circulation claims and "toady" relations with SOC officials.

Wife Kathleen, handling administrative and technical matters, is not concerned and considers The Post's advertising base to be more enduring than that of its competitor. Outside printing jobs push revenues well over The Post's \$8,000 a month operating expenses and profits are reinvested - keeping potential suitors at bay.

"We already have everyone in the world who thinks they know our business better than we do, the last thing we need is to have one of those people as an investor in the paper," says Kathleen, who camouflages a keen wit behind an artsy demeanour.

"In some ways we started up at the best of times but from now on it's going to get more restrictive both

editorially and business-wise."

A newly enforced tax collected at the airport when the paper arrives after printing in Bangkok may herald future problems of control. "I would be willing to sacrifice some of the quality for more control," Kathleen says. With The Post one of the cleanest newspapers around - it's halfway to a magazine, the Hayes have plenty of room to manoeuvre. Their hope is that a large enough printing press finds its way to politically neutral hands in Phnom Penh. Such an scenario would also ease the transition of The Post to a weekly format.

"All our readers would love for us to go weekly and from a news point of view we would of course like to do that too but it will be the economics that decides that and its not clear that it's something we can manage right now," explains Hayes.

Notably absent from The Post is an editorial column, although its piquant Gecko column serves a similar function. "I am reluctant as a

foreigner to criticize Khmers, I am not sure that is my role," he says. "I would rather have them use the paper as a forum with which to reflect critically on their own society if they want to."

Hayes says regular coverage of other, independent Khmer-language newspapers is one way The Post can contribute to a more hospitable press environment.

"I could easily stay here for five years without thinking about it. I mean, where else can I run my own newspaper . . . running your own business is much more fun than working for somebody else," says Michael, seconded by Kathleen.

Journalist's Profile

Bangkok-based correspondent Ken Stier writes for several publications including the Phnom Penh Post and is a friend of the Hayes.

The FCCT Fun Run

Out in the field, the ninth annual FCCT Fun Run in Lumpini Park, this year held on 31 January, drew a handful of club stalwarts to join a starting line-up of more than 450 runners ranging from grandfathers to toddlers. While the overall and category winners took home prizes ranging from air tickets to gold chains for their efforts, the real winners from this event are the 30,000 under-privileged children at Bangkok Metropolitan Authority schools whose lunches will be subsidised by the Bt39,520 the run raised. This money was handed to M L Chitrasarn Xumsai, president of the 25 Satang Foundation, for disbursement. The stature of the Fun Run would, however, benefit from greater member involvement and donation of prizes. Thanks must go to the many companies and individuals who generously contributed their time, services and prizes to the success of this year's Fun Run.



Pedalling The Sky Road

BY DON ROSS

RAIN POURED OVER THE SHOP FRONT GUTTERS IN ENDLESS TORRENTS. THE TRAFFIC POLICEMAN WIPED HIS GLASSES MURMURING SOMETHING ABOUT UNSEASONABLE WEATHER AS HE STARED AT THE GREY LEADEN SKY. ALL AROUND US SHOP KEEPERS PULLED DOWN THEIR SHUTTERS TO ESCAPE THE DAMP AND PUDDLES WHICH HAD INVADED THE STREETS OF MAE SOT TOWN.



Urai Chuaywongse Ross

Electric light bulbs flickered. The town's supply, precarious enough on a sunny day, was about to forsake us. What a sorry sight we must have looked — four bedraggled cyclists soaked to the skin and about ready to call off a five-day leisurely ride from Tak to Mae Hong Son.

On paper, the itinerary had looked just fine. This is the dry season, we reassured ourselves as we unloaded four lightweight racing bikes from the roof of the four-wheel drive van in Tak's town centre. We squinted at the sky looking for a sign — a break in the clouds and mist.

Surely the sun would peep through to warm our shoulders as we pedalled the 90 kms to Mae Sot. It didn't and we joked about the accuracy of weather forecasts in Thailand at least for the first two kilometres. But the drizzle progressed to heavy rain and the pleasant road winding through a valley of teak trees gave way to switch

back bends that transverse the mountain range.

Some cyclists take their mountains very seriously musing over altitudes as they strive to maintain their cadence. "Was it 1066 metres to the summit or 1048?" "Who cares," retorts the more practical pedaller of our party. "I'm bloody soaked and I need a cup of tea."

The driver of a fully laden truck, on its way to Mae Sot, waves to us to hitch a ride. He is struggling up this gradient in first gear spewing a cloud of black diesel fumes from the exhaust. We are tempted, but then we see our support van waiting at the top. Someone must have a kettle on the boil. They did and it was instantly voted best cuppa of the year. Highway 105 climbs over two peaks on its route westward to Mae Sot.

In between, the guidebooks describe the terrain as a plateau where natural forest has been laid waste to make way for commercial farming or

plantations. A steady stream of pick up trucks and lorries transport goods to the border town market, while in the opposite direction heavily laden logging trucks cautiously descend, their brakes smouldering and steaming in the rain.

Even this modern asphalted highway retains a link with superstition. Somewhere on this rain drenched road, a small sign in Thai announces a magic stretch of tarmac. The sign exhorts you to halt on the white line painted across the highway and then release the hand brake. The vehicle will move forward by about 200 metres, even though the road appears to be going up hill. Or so the sages claim.

No harm in accepting a little help over the next 200 metres, we thought. Sure enough, with front wheels on the line and just a slight touch of the pedal to achieve balance, we move forward albeit it at a snail's pace. From the last summit, Mae Sot lay before us

in a valley covered in mist and steady salt and pepper rain.

One of the team announces what we had all been thinking: "if it's like this tomorrow, I'm riding in the broom wagon." From Mae Sot our route takes us north along highway 1085 which hugs the River Moei for most of its way north to Mae Sot, a distance of 230kms. Opened in 1991, the surfaced road is remote and possibly unsafe after dusk. We intend to cover 120 km to Mae Salit village, and then take our van up a steep mountain trail to a bungalow resort.

Mae Sot had fully recovered during the night. The electricity was back; the shops at the border back in business. We cycle out of town, northwards on highway 1085, jockeying for position on the narrow road with a herd of cows; the day's worst traffic hazard. Throughout its 230 kms length, the road has no more than four small villages. It snakes through a valley which gradually shrinks as the mountains squeeze it from both sides. Our supply wagon was already well up the road scouting for food — noodles and fried rice.

We had established a routine — ride 40kms and stop for meal and drinks. The hard part for the wagon crew was finding a village with a noodle stall or wayside restaurant. At one village, a friendly policeman warns us to be in Mae Salit before dusk. He looks at our bikes and the wagon and hints that we must be crazy to cycle when we have a comfortable air conditioned vehicle. If you blinked at the wrong time you would ride through Mae Salit none the wiser. Just before the junction to this small Karen village, you come across a dilapidated bunker with a rusty old gun peeping through a pile of sand bags. A few hundred metres further on is the village's main asset, a police box and a sign pointing to Monkrating Resort, 16 kilometres up a steep mountain road.

Monkrating will always be remembered for its icy cold showers and fine Thai food. The water surges through the pvc pipes to the bungalows from a nearby mountain stream. Whatever, the text books claim about water being warmer in the morning, the rule does not apply to Monkrating. Here bath time is

sheer agony any time of the day.

The food is packaged in a full board rate— 560 baht per person. Karen waiters who can hardly speak a word of Thai or English serve five Thai dishes for dinner and another five for breakfast. Mae Salit is surrounded by mountains covered in a sea of mist in the early morning. From here, the road struggles to stay within the confines of the narrow valley, but after 20 km the first of numerous signs indicating "steep incline ahead" stands tall on the grass verge. The Thais say this road "floats in the sky" (Thanon loy Fah) for more than 80kms until it reaches Mae Sot valley. The contoured map of the Royal Thai Survey Department does nothing to shoal up our confidence on this our third day. The contours are packed too close together. Dark brown and grey shades show ridges rippling across the map in an east to west direction. We seriously doubt if we can cover the distance to Mae Sot by sunset.

We did, but only just. The last rays of sunlight were disappearing behind the Burmese mountains when we pedalled down Mae Sot's main street. So far we had followed a road rarely used by travellers bound for Mae Hong Son. But from here on we join Highway 108 that was, up until 1989, the only road link with this north-western town. All the roads had been in good condition, ideal for skinny tyres and thin rimmed road bikes. But from here on road conditions deteriorated, fast.

Some 50 kms, after leaving Mae Sot for the small town of Khun Yuam, a shop keeper tells us our hopes of reaching today's destination are about to fall apart. "You'll never get through on those bikes," he said, as we polished off our second bowl of noodles. "The road is broken up for 30 kms all the way to Khun Yuam." We only half believed him. "Perhaps he means half the road or half the distance," commented the guy who thought it would stop raining in Tak.

He was wrong then and he is wrong now. Just 10 kms out of the village, with exactly 30 km to go, the smooth asphalt gives way to shale, then rock and finally rubble. The bikes shudder

to a halt. Up ahead a line of quarry trucks zig zag down the mountain side in formation. As they pass, raising a dust storm, we decide to call it quits. Now the broom wagon sweeps us up. The owner of Baan Farang in the small quaint village of Khun Yuam must have thought we were real posers. Four racing bikes on the roof, we drive up to the front door in fancy lycia and four wheel drive comfort.

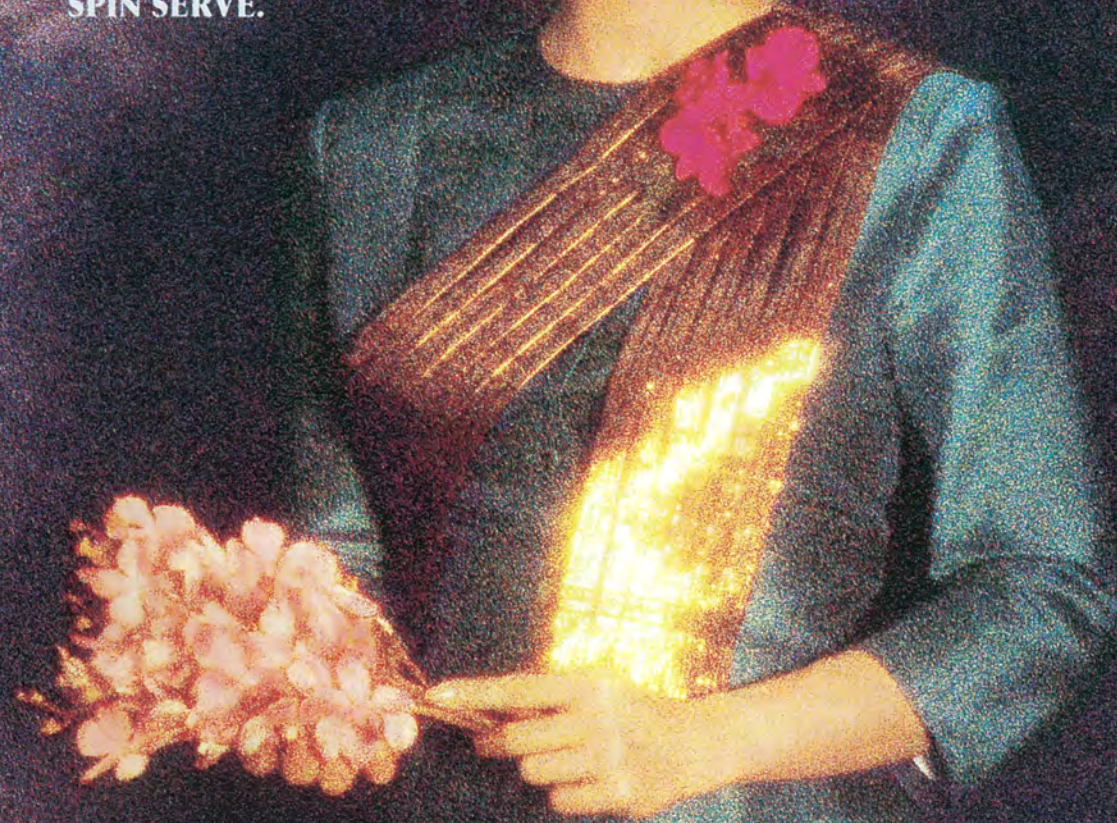
We felt an explanation was needed. So did he. "The highway has been like that for two years," he said. "The locals joke that the contractor will soon be paying the government to build it." We have just one more ride to complete our tour — 66 kms from Khun Yuam through the mountains to Mae Hong Son. The morning is chilly and a mist clings to the tree lined road. We worry that a truck or car might not see us. But like all the other days, the road is deserted except for an occasional motor cyclist or a pick up truck transporting workers to the forest. The road surface is not the best we have encountered, but the forest is thick almost ready to reclaim what the highway department had taken away in 1969, when it built this road.

Above the sound of our wheels and the metallic click of the chain running over cogs, we can hear the distinct sounds of the forest. Finally as we reach the last pass, Mae Hong Son valley unfolds in the distance with its white chedi on the mount, the lake and the mountains beyond. Our small odometer reads 490 kms from the time we left Tak. "Last one at the lake shouts the beers," yells the guy at the front, confident there are no more hills this side of Mae Hong Son. But in this valley of mists you can never be sure how many hills there are between you and a cold beer.

Journalist's Profile

Don Ross is managing editor of TTR Asia, published by his wife Urai Chuaywongse Ross.

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Behind the Scenes

BY ELIZABETH LU

YOU MAY NOT KNOW DUMRAS RODJANAPICHES BUT CHANCES ARE THAT YOU'VE SEEN HIS AD IN THE FCCT WEEKLY BULLETIN: WANTED - LP RECORDS.



Photos by Elizabeth Lu

He is also the man who picks the Monday night movie selections and writes those succinct film introductions in The Bulletin. Most of the overseas newspapers and magazines in the club reading area are available to members thanks to Dumras too.

An avid reader and news junkie, Dumras scours Chatuchak market every Saturday for current editions of foreign newspapers, and he also has a airport contact who cleans in-coming planes and saves overseas newspapers for him. After Dumras finishes pouring over the papers himself, he brings them to the club by the stackful and charges a nominal fee of 200 baht for his troubles.

So through his voluntary FCCT work, Dumras, a Bangkok native, has been able to combine three of his greatest passions: music, movies and reading.

An FCCT member who joined the club shortly after he returned eight

years ago from Canada, Dumras has also helped organise some Wednesday night programs, especially those involving film makers and movie stars. He is fond of photographs taken with Air America pilots who spoke at one evening program and another taken with one of his favourite movie stars, Jan-Michael Vincent. "He was great in The Mechanic with Charles Bronson," Dumras said.

A textile engineer by training, Dumras received his degree from Georgia Institute of Technology before moving to Canada to work. He is now director of Bangkok-based Krops Ventures Co. Ltd., a trading company he started with his sister. He joined the FCCT, he said, because he likes hanging out with journalists.

Dumras has handled the club's movie program for the past three years and was about to step aside when new FCCT president Bertil Linter called and begged him to stay on. Fortunately for FCCT members, Dumras agreed.

As a child, Dumras loved going to

Bangkok movie theatres to catch the latest Hollywood releases, as well as those from England, Japan and India. Back then, the cheap seats cost five baht and the best seats in the house went for 16 baht. Dumras opted for 12.50 baht seats and loved following the adventures of Tyrone Power, Gary Cooper and Doris Day.

At one time, he also loved watching French movies at the Alliance Francaise but stopped going when the Alliance started showing old movies from its video library instead of new French releases. Ironically, Dumras doesn't go to the FCCT's Monday movie nights, which attracts about 25 people a week. Often he has seen the movies already, he said. Dumras' movie expertise prompted former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun to appoint him to the Board of Directors of Channel 11 in Bangkok. He had been recommended by then minister Meechai Viravaidya, whom Dumras met at the FCCT.

Every week Dumras' six line ad in the The Bulletin urges club members

Behind the Scenes

Dumras' movie expertise prompted former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun

to appoint him to the Board of Directors of Channel 11 in Bangkok.

to sell them their old 12" thick vinyl or 78 RPM shellac records. The shellacs are those thick, old, breakable records people used to play on gramophones. The ad attracts about two or three calls a month and Dumras buys almost all types of music, except classical. His record collection, which he started when he was ten, and which he greatly expanded during his years of study and work in the United States and Canada, now numbers 7078. Much of it came from patronising yard sales and flea markets, he said.

A second-floor all purpose room at his home is lined with shelf after shelf of records. The shelves are not labelled, yet Dumras has his entire collection catalogued in his head and has no problem pulling out the soundtrack to "South Pacific" when requested. "Do you want to hear the Broadway or movie version?" he asked.

Dumras, 42, said his first love is the music he listened to as a child with his parents. He adores Big Band and other music from the forties and fifties: soft, mellow music by the likes of Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra and Pat Boone. He thinks Connie Francis is great but Barbara Streisand wins only an "okay".

Dumras said he loves mainly pre-Beatles music, although naturally as a collector, he has highly-prized albums by artists such as David Bowie and also the Beatles themselves, including two copies of the Fab Four's first US release "Introducing the Beatles". The 1964 album, if in mint condition and never played, is now worth around 25,000 baht, according to Dumras.

But Dumras said making money is not his main goal in collecting good records. He simply loves records and the joy of collecting. Unlike CDs, which he described as small, icy items

one simply throws into a machine, records have to be carefully handled and cleaned and have more of a personal touch, he said. He enjoys reading the album covers too.

Beginning last September, Dumras has also been writing a music column in the Thai-language Siam Post. Called "Pop Songs of the Past," his column tells readers about the history of various old songs and singers. "The new generation can't relate to it," he said. "But people in their 30s and 40s love it," he said of the column.

Standing in his recreation room and surveying the thousands of records in his collection he said: "This is my little corner of the world".

Journalist's Profile

Elizabeth Lu is a freelance correspondent based in Bangkok and regular contributor to Dateline.



Wandering Eye



to the lost kouprey — finds himself right at the heart of the disagreement.

Thayer, taking a bold, integrationist stance, opted for "creampuff". Phil Schuler, also from the US, provocatively plumped for "cream puff". A certain Bill Lobban, origins unknown, sided with the Thayer school of spelling but ruled the argument essentially irrelevant. "It is extremely difficult to make a good cream puff in the tropics," he rightly pointed out in a tart letter to the Phnom Penh Post,

A major row is raging in Phnom Penh. Is it "cream puff" or "creampuff"? Predictably, intrepid war correspondent Nate Thayer — prime chronicler of the FULRO montagnard saga, veteran of Phaen Fah Bridge, impresario

the admirably swelling organ of Club member Michael Hayes. A noted contributor to its letters page, HRH Prince Norodom Sihanouk, has surprisingly failed to make his feelings known in the controversy.

Unfortunately for Thayer, the argument goes beyond mere spelling. He is the argument. Schuler took exception to an interview the fearless newshound conducted with Khieu Samphan, a man known among things for his sometimes unusual choice of headwear. "Do your readers a favor — next time you interview the Khmer Rouge, send a real professional reporter — not a cream puff like this Thayer guy," urged Schuler.

Thayer exercised his right of reply with commendable dignity. "I've been called a puppet lackey, an intelligence operative, a right wing jerk, a communist sympathizer, and a hopeless drunk, but I have never been called a creampuff and I resent it." That did it for Lobban, "a long-term resident of Cambodia who has been subjected to Mr. Thayer's Errol Flynnish style of journalism for most of that time ...". An embittered man (which might account for the muddled Flynns), Lobban considered "lightweight twerp" more appropriate to Thayer.

Is it "cream puff" or "creampuff"?

Will Lobban become a less long-term resident of Cambodia than he had envisaged — a kouprey to the letters page? He can no longer rely on safe cantonment at the No Problem Cafe, and honour must be satisfied. Errol Flynn, the greatest swordsman Hollywood has known, was certainly no cream puff/creampuff*. This is a fundamentally non-negotiable issue. Weapons of choice: seven-day-old doughnuts at ten yards. The foyer of the Cambodiana Hotel commends itself to this duel of literary titans given the unrestricted ordnance from the adjoining pastry corner. Plenty of room for lightweight cream puff/creampuff twerps, too. Schuler and Lobban will have to fight this one out like real men.

From the ridiculous to the sublime. With the charming logic only he can muster, the eminence grise of the Phnom Penh press corps travelled to darkest Cambodia to find himself a Thai bride. Irrepressible London Telegraph correspondent Leo Dobbs recently tied the knot with Nongnuj 'Nutt' Pengsupaya in a traditional Siamese ceremony back here on her home soil. The love birds winged on to Malaysia where they honeymooned blissfully on exotic tropical islands and in cool hills. The consensus is that Leo is an extremely fortunate fellow, Nutt is a saint, and both deserve the very best.

Happy couples seem to abound. Paul and Alison Clements-Hunt, the only correspondents in the Club actually married to each other, produced their first cub reporter in November, Cameron Patrick. Green to the core, Paul reckons the addition to the Clements-Hunt house hold is a considerable environmental improvement. Both agree that all training will have to be strictly in-house, where Alison is working on an ultra top secret project that is absolutely not to be discussed under any circumstances, not even a little.

Angus and Keiko MacSwan are meanwhile expecting their second child mid-year, but not in choking Bangkok. Sadly for their many friends, MacSwan was posted to Nicosia just in time to observe Saddam Hussein initiate yet more folly in the region. The latter's recent jousts with the US may have been disparaged by a Pentagon official as "not even the second cousin to the Mother of all Battles", but things could hot up yet.

The highly successful visit of His Holiness the Dalai Lama was a great and happy event in the Club's history. But it was also nerve-wracking, eleventh-hour stuff.

Indeed, Presidentissimo Bertil Lintner became so anxious that the affair be orderly, there seemed at one point a serious possibility of journalists being shackled to their chairs. How better to gain a clearer understanding of human rights abuses in neighbouring Burma?

Among many memorable moments, the visit produced an extraordinary encounter between His Holiness and award-winning Australian photographer Phillip Blenkinsop, now a fully paid-up journalist member. Blenkinsop's taste for unusual fashion statements has led to his forcible eviction from some of the finest hotels in India, his brand of self-expression being sometimes poorly understood by nine-foot-tall Sikh doormen.

As he was leaving, the Dalai Lama caught sight of Blenkinsop at the top of

In these uncertain times, the Club thought it wise to enlist the services of a prominent astrologer, Wisara Pranomkorn, early in the year for a Wednesday night. A packed audience was treated to a series of predictions, some of which have already proved wildly wrong. This should appease the wife of a certain former Executive Committee member. The hapless spouse was solemnly informed that her husband would embark upon a passionate affair with an "older woman". An affair is one thing, but the older woman business was downright insulting.

the stairs and waded through three or four people to take him by the hand. The Dalai Lama pointed to his own head and then to Blenkinsop's inimitable haircut. "New style — very good!" said His Holiness, giving an enthusiastic thumbs up. Photographer Mikel Flamm, on hand to record this remarkable cultural exchange, was so completely flabbergasted he forgot to take a picture. Keep practicing Mikel.

* Authorized FCCT spelling has been referred to Past Presidentissima Tan Lian Choo for a Professional Committee ruling.



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