



## Court of the Khmer Kings

by **Richard Shand**

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*Sections of dusters (consisting of two vehicles) were often attached to allied units operating in III Corps. On numerous occasions I found myself working with Aussies, Kiwis and Thais as well as ARVN units. Living among the soldiers of a different culture could lead to unexpected surprises.*

"Fuck!" Our squad was pulling night guard on the berm of Bear Cat, the base camp of the Royal Thai Army. The bunker was cramped, stifling hot, caked with dry mud and without mosquito nets. It was hell to sleep inside - a steam bath filled with the constant whine of mosquitoes.

I climbed out, soaked with sweat and unable to sleep. Arthur, sitting in the turret of the Duster, was talking to Moseby. "They got one inside the wire the other night just over there. The trip flare went off and everybody opened up. Then the gunships came." Big deal. Except for an occasional sapper or a little incoming, nothing much ever happened at Bearcat.

I complained about the suffocating heat to Will, our squad leader. There was a quick discussion among the four of us present. A consensus was reached. Moseby and I were elected to go and fetch a quart of milk - cool, wholesome, homogenized milk.

The two of us walked across the road and entered a nearby Thai mess hall. I hailed a kitchen orderly chopping away at a piece of pork. "Milk, you know, moo-moo?" I indicated by tipping an imaginary glass to my lips.

"Yeh, yeh!" The orderly was all broad smiles and rubber nods. He grabbed our elbows and propelled us across the kitchen and into a large dining room. It was filled with high-ranking Thai officers.

"Shit..." remarked Moseby.

A cry went up as we entered. The officers were obviously in an advanced state of intoxication. Moseby and I were greeted like old lost comrades. A space was cleared at the end of one table and chairs brought over for us. The orderly pointed to the beer bottles on the table and made the motion of drinking. Laughing, he departed.

"We...ahh...actually came here for a quart of milk."

Hands reached at us and pulled us down into the chairs. "How do you do?" inquired a pudgy officer with shining cheeks. I didn't know what his rank was. The Thais used sunbursts instead of bars.

"Fine, fine." I nodded my head. A number of Thais within reach started shaking hands with Moseby and myself.

"You know Cleveland? I have brother there."

"No, no. I'm from New Mexico." More nods and smiles. Two shot glasses were filled and placed in front of us. It was Thai whiskey, a potent mixture of jungle juice that ignited the insides like napalm. We knew by experience to drink it in one gulp. "Caconca, thank-you." We tossed the drinks down and could feel the lining burn of the inside of our throats.

"Ahh, you have Buddha." The pudgy officer point to the clear plastic charms with clay impressions of Buddha inside, strung in a chain around my neck. Thai friends had bestowed them as gifts.

"Yes, Buddha. Very good, number one," I acknowledged using the pidgin English we used with the Vietnamese. I shook the necklace.

A thin, imperious figure bent over towards me. "Tell me, how long have you been with the Thai soldiers?" His eyes were narrow slits. He took a long draw from a cigarette holder scissored between his first two fingers.

"A couple of months." Our shot glasses were refilled. I stood up and lifted my glass in toast to the Thai regiment. "Black Panther is number one!" I called out. There were a number of "ahhs" and a general murmur of assent. I choked back the whisky.

A large-boned, thick-lipped officer opposite spoke up. "You know Hank Williams?" He began to sing "Your cheatin' heart will make you cry, you cheating' heart..." All Thais know Hank Williams.

"Yes, yes. I know Hank Williams." I downed my third glass.

"Then you sing."

"No, no..." I protested. "I'm no good. You're much better. You sing." He stood and sang the entire song in a country drawl accented by a high nasal singsong. There was a hearty round of applause and more drinks. I was beginning to feel infused with a golden haze. Moseby and I had become Western ambassadors to the Orient - Marco Polos in the court of Genghis Kahn or the Khmer kings. Resounding with laughter and cheers, the room had become the communal feast hall of heroes.

All around us, other Thais sung in turn, mostly atonal tunes from their native land. "Now you sing too." The young officer's eyes flashed black.

"It is the custom," explained the thin-lipped Thai with the cigarette holder.

"I can't." Hands propelled me to a standing position and I look down at the attentive rows of grinning and laughing round faces. Improvising quickly, I sang "We all live in a yellow submarine, yellow submarine, yellow submarine..." My rendition drew a surprisingly enthusiastic response. Moseby complied with a bluegrass tune from his home state of Tennessee.

My memory of the remainder of the evening is indistinct. The squad had waited impatiently for hours for Moseby and myself to return. somehow, bleary-eyed and staggering, we returned to our position. We never did bring back any milk.

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