



SOLDIERS OF SIAM: A FIRST WORLD WAR CHRONICLE

BY KHWAN PHUSRISOM

Lemongrass Books, 2020

Pp. vi, 192. \$25

REVIEW BY BARRY M. STENTIFORD

Siam, modern Thailand, is the only country in Southeast Asia that was never colonized. It achieved that feat by resisting when possible and yielding when necessary during the years of imperialist expansion. It simultaneously instituted reforms that made the kingdom more legitimate to the Europeans. World War I presented Siam an opportunity to solidify its independence by allying with France and Britain against Germany. Other factors were also at work. King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, reigned 1910–1925), an honorary general of the British Army, studied law and history at Christ Church, Oxford, and maintained personal connections with members of the British aristocracy. Further, Vajiravudh was aware of German espionage within Siam and feared that his country would become a target of German colonialism should Germany win.

Siam declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary on 22 July 1917. The kingdom raised an expeditionary force of four battalions, which left Bangkok in June 1918. The Siamese soldiers were grouped as Transportation, Medical, or Air Service, although apparently, none

of the soldiers had any prior training in these specialties. Upon their arrival in France, the medical soldiers were assigned as hospital orderlies, the airmen began training under French instructors, and the transportation soldiers were taught to drive and maintain their vehicles. Afterward, the transportation soldiers were assigned to the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF).

Soldiers of Siam is a short volume that is mainly a translation of a chronicle kept by Sgt. Kleuap Kaysorn of the transportation corps. His manuscript was translated by Khwan Phusrisom, who added an introduction that placed the war in the context of Siam's internal and external relations and an epilogue examining the results of the war. She holds a PhD in Anglo-Thai relations and spent two years in the Rhineland while working on the book, making her uniquely qualified to translate the work.

Phusrisom uses the terms Siamese and Thai interchangeably throughout the book, as Sergeant Kaysorn apparently did in his original chronicle. She makes clear throughout the work that she sees German conduct during the war and in its African colonies before the war as inhumane, and she ties Imperial Germany's conduct directly to the later rise and acceptance of Nazi practices and ideology. She includes two short chapters that give a brief overview of the service of the medical and aviation soldiers, as well as a short account from another soldier in the transportation corps of his experience in the Rhineland, rounding out Kaysorn's account.

Sergeant Kaysorn was a veterinarian, not a professional soldier, when he volunteered for the expeditionary force. He lied about his age, claiming to be younger than his 36 years. His patriotism and devout Buddhism come through clearly throughout the work. He has a keen eye and a subtle sense of humor. His observations of the wealth of Singapore; the degradation of the people of Columbo, Ceylon; and the difficulties of dealing with the people of Port Sa'id, Egypt, offer intriguing glimpses into the world at the height of the imperialist age. His impressions of the French, the Americans, and the Vietnamese are also valuable for understanding the era. At first, he was taken aback by the lack of Asian brotherhood shown by the Vietnamese. However, after seeing the abuse heaped on them

by the French, in sharp contrast to the generally amiable attitude of the French to the Siamese, he understood the role colonialism played in the degradation of a people.

The transportation and medical troops supported the AEF in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive in the later summer and fall of 1918. Sergeant Kaysorn described the hardships, dangers, and frustrations of the Siamese in the campaign. Many of the Siamese became ill during the first wave of the Spanish flu, which fortunately left those who recovered immune to the later, more deadly wave. As a result, the Siamese, although they lost troops to the disease, apparently had a lower death rate, which the Siamese soldiers attributed to the natural immunity of Asians. After the Armistice, the Siamese transportation soldiers supported the French army in the occupation of the Rhineland to pressure Germany into signing the Treaty of Versailles.

The Siamese soldiers spent several months in the Rhineland, serving first in Mussbach and later in Hochspeyer. The European winter left a strong impression on the sergeant. Coming from a tropical country, a typical winter in the Rhineland was a miserable ordeal for the Siamese. Equally chilly was the initial reception from the Germans, and Kaysorn had to grapple with his feelings about living among people he recently had seen as the enemy. Eventually, warmer relations grew, but he became disappointed by some of his colleagues who took German girlfriends, which he believed brought shame to the Siamese army.

In all, the Siamese Expeditionary Force lost nineteen soldiers during the war, fourteen of whom died from the Spanish flu. Sergeant Kaysorn commented much less on the return voyage to Bangkok, but he did describe the tumultuous welcome the soldiers received. Upon their return to Siam, the pilots and aircraft mechanics formed the nucleus of what became the Royal Thai Air Force. Phusrisom added information on Kaysorn's life after his return, and sadly it was not a happy tale. On his way to his home after his discharge, carrying his military service pay and the money the king gave him for his chronicle, Kaysorn was robbed and left penniless. He eventually married and had a family, but his wife died and he fell into alcoholism and homelessness, possibly from what today would be called post-traumatic

stress disorder. He eventually would be rescued by one of his daughters but later died in a road accident when he was 76.

Soldiers of Siam joins Stefan Hell's *Siam and World War I: An International History* (River Books) from 2017 as the only currently available works in English about Siam in the Great War. Whereas Hell placed events in Siam at the center while also exploring the larger context of Siam's participation, *Soldiers of Siam* is mostly the story of a single observant Siamese soldier, providing a less academic but more personal account. Kaysorn's observations of the various people he encountered during his journey and in France offer vivid images of a world that no longer exists. In a larger context, *Soldiers of Siam* provides an understanding of why small countries sometimes join alliances or participate in wars seemingly outside of their immediate interests. As such, *Soldiers of Siam* offers a case study of how smaller countries can successfully navigate the treacherous waters of a major war to their advantage.

Dr. Barry M. Stentiford is a professor of history at the U.S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

