

## Bangkok Christmas R&R

“Steve should have been there by now,” I thought as I hung up the phone. I knew that the flight from Long Binh, S. Viet Nam had landed at Don Muong Airport outside Bangkok four hours ago. I had checked after arriving on a military shuttle from Korat, 40 kilometers from where my engineer battalion was building a highway through the rain forest. It was Christmas Eve day.

A hot, dirty cab took me through the crowded streets of Bangkok to the Prince Hotel. I asked at the front desk, “Would you please check again to see if Stephen Mueller has checked in. He should have been here hours ago.” The Thai clerk looked through the registration slips. “Sorry, no Mr. Mueller is here.” “Could I see who else might have arrived today?” I asked. The clerk flipped through the registrations. Then I saw “StephenMueller” filed under “S”.

I found Steve resting in room 20. He was dressed in pressed khakis with new sergeant’s stripes on the sleeves. I had already shed my lieutenant’s uniform and had changed into civvies. Finally, our R&R was underway! Two South Dakota Lutheran farm soldier boys were ready to celebrate Christmas in heathen, hedonistic Bangkok.

Only enlisted personnel stayed at the Prince Hotel. Officers stayed at the Chao Parya Hotel. I told Steve to check out since I had already booked rooms at the Happy Happy Hotel. The Happy Happy Hotel had been discovered during the disastrous officers’ bus trip to Bangkok last Christmas—but that’s another story. It was a bright, clean, well-located, cheap hotel with a small bar/restaurant and a swimming pool. Most rooms had mirrors on the ceilings. The staff had decorated the place for Christmas and even had small gifts around the tree for guests like us. To them Christmas was a good excuse for a party. Thais love parties!

We didn’t stick around the hotel waiting for the party that evening. I wanted to show my younger brother some of the things I had grown to appreciate about Bangkok, even if it was the holiest night of the year. At the Imperial Hotel near the United States Embassy, we dined on Kobe beef soaked and seared in cognac. Large bottles of Singha beer washed down the meal. After dinner we strolled half a block to the massage parlor where our slightly woozy bodies were bathed and pampered by young women chosen from a “bullpen” of 40. All on the up-and-up, of course!

The rest of Christmas Eve was a blur. I think we visited a nightclub or two. Years later when our mother discovered a photograph of me and Steve with a couple of Thai women in miniskirts and heavy makeup, Steve nonchalantly commented, “It was sure nice of those girls to want us to take their picture with us.” My mother glared at me!

When we returned to the Happy Happy Hotel at 2:00 a.m., all the presents had vanished from beneath the tree. The restaurant showed signs of a party. Cleanup would have to wait for the light of Christmas Day. We crashed for a few hours only to be awakened by calls from the front desk. Our driver and tour guide were waiting to take us on a trip to see the bridge on the Kwai River.

We visited a WWII cemetery on our trip to the bridge; it was occupied by the bridge builders, victims of the Malay death march. Beneath the bridge we boarded a long, narrow Thai water taxi for a trip to some religious caves down the river. As we returned to bridge in

**our water taxi, we saw a man plummet off the bridge and hit the rocks in the water below.**

**Several tour buses were parked near the scene. I guess folks all over the world get really depressed at Christmas!**

**The next morning Steve and I returned to Don Muong Airport for his flight back to Viet Nam and my flight back to Korat and the jungle camp. We have never talked about the Christmas R&R since then. Two years later we both mustered out of the Army. The Viet Nam war continued without us. Steve became a farmer and raised his family in South Dakota. I moved to Texas for a job and got married.**

**Compared to all the Christmases with family, friends, and church that Steve and I grew up with in South Dakota, the R&R Christmas was the loneliest. Perhaps we experienced the emptiness that Christ came into the world to fill. Since then, Christmas has become much more precious.**