OSS Detachment 404 and Operations in Southeast Asia

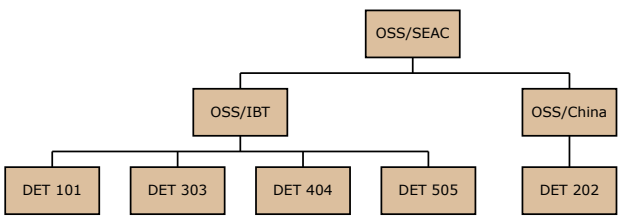
by David G. Knapp

OSS operations in Thailand and Southeast Asia are less well known than the activities of the OSS in Burma (Detachment 101) and China (Detachment 202). However, the activities of Detachment 404 in Thailand were politically important to setting the stage for U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia during the Cold War. To appreciate the contributions of Detachment 404 that promulgated the post-war relationship with the government of Thailand, it is necessary to explain the complex command relationships that affected the OSS in the China-Burma-India (CBI) theater of operations. Early in the war, the Pacific commanders, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz and General Douglas MacArthur, barred the OSS from their areas of operation. It was Lieutenant General Joseph "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell's CBI Theater that provided the OSS its only entrance into Asia.

Lieutenant General Joseph Stilwell (left) and Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten (right) confer in March 1944. Notice that Stilwell, associated with his other role as Commanding General, Chinese Army in India, is wearing a Chinese Army cap.

One of the results of the Quebec Conference in September 1943 was the creation of a separate Allied Command for Southeast Asia (SEAC). Quebec was the site of one of several strategic planning conferences conducted during the war. There, the political and military leadership of the Allied nations met face-to-face to discuss war strategy. British Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten was named the Supreme Allied Commander, Southeast Asia (SEAC). LTG Stilwell, U.S. commander in the CBI theater, became the deputy supreme commander. SEAC was created to bring some unity and new energy to a theater comprised of distinct countries (India, Burma, China) with often competing Allied and U.S. service interests.[1]

In November 1943, Major General William J. Donovan, the head of the OSS, met with Lord Mountbatten in New Delhi, India, to discuss expanding OSS operations in Southeast Asia. The agreement reached between Donovan and Mountbatten resulted in a reorganization of the OSS in Asia. At that time, Detachment 101 and various OSS headquarters and liaison personnel were focused on the China and Burma theater. Donovan conceded a change of authority for OSS activities from the U.S. theater commander, LTG Stilwell, to "P" Division of the SEAC headquarters. "P" Division, headed by a Royal Navy captain with an American deputy, was the staff section responsible for all clandestine activity in the theater (espionage, sabotage, propaganda, etc.). In return, Detachment 101 retained its tactical autonomy as an allied guerrilla force operating in northern Burma. It



OSS Organization in the South East Asia Command circa January 1945.

was essentially exempt from SEAC operational oversight. They also agreed that the OSS could only provide U.S. intelligence directly to the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington instead of routing it through SEAC headquarters to the Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff in London.[2]

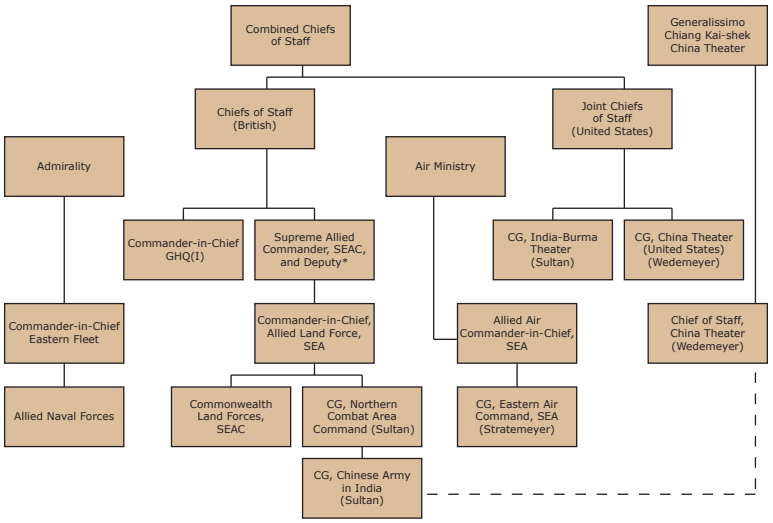
The creation of SEAC and the resultant reorganization of the theater, combined with Donovan's desire to expand OSS operations, resulted in the creation of Detachment 404 and OSS/SEAC. Detachment 404 had oversight and operational responsibility for all OSS activities in SEAC except Burma and China. OSS/SEAC functioned as a planning headquarters that oversaw all OSS activities in the theater. In the summer of 1944, the U.S. War Department prepared a proposal to divide the CBI into two separate theaters—China and India/Burma. This split was effective by October 1944, coinciding with LTG Stilwell's departure.

The reorganization of the CBI caused the OSS in Asia to create two regional headquarters that mirrored the split of the theater: OSS/India-Burma (OSS/IBT) and OSS/China. Many of Detachment 404's senior staff officers were transferred to OSS/IBT. Detachment 404's Operational Groups (OGs) were also reassigned during the winter of 1944–1945, and many of its operators were assigned to Detachment 202 (China) due to the extreme difficulty of mounting and supporting OG operations over the vast distances of Southeast Asia.[3]

Despite all of the command and control changes and resultant headquarters, Detachment 404 conducted operations in southern Burma, Siam (Thailand), Malaya, the Andaman Islands, Sumatra, the adjacent islands of the Dutch East Indies, and southern Indo-China during its twenty-one months of service. Extensive Research and Analysis (R&A) and counter-intelligence operations (X-2) were conducted in India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka).[4]

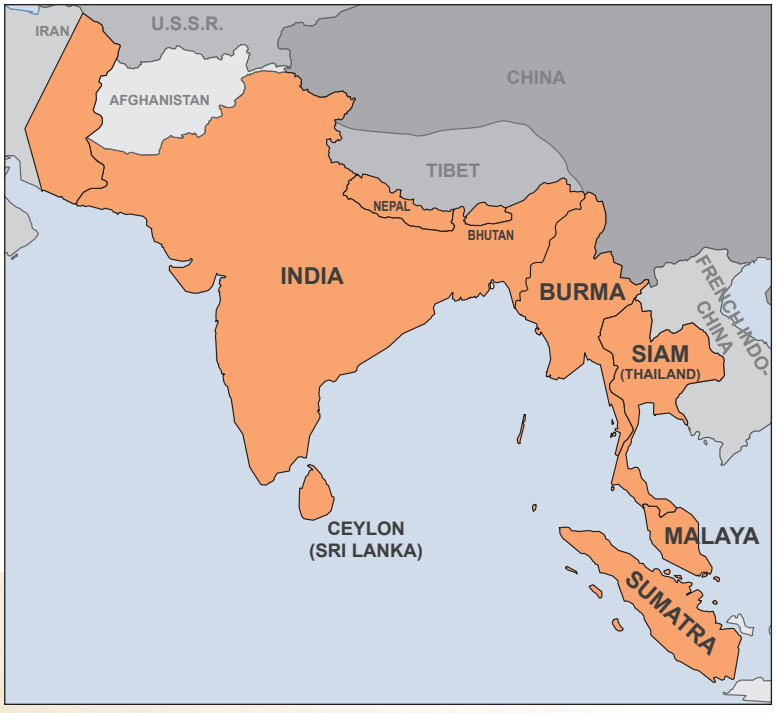
Detachment 101 provided important organizational lessons learned from its combat experiences in Burma. Therefore, Det 404 found that team specialization for its SI (Strategic Intelligence) and SO (Special Operations) teams was unnecessary and counterproductive to missions into denied territory. Det 404 directed that each SO or SI team therefore be trained and prepared to perform all aspects of guerrilla operations, sabotage, espionage, and intelligence collection and reporting.[5] During the period 1944–1945, Detachment 404 transmitted some 2,400 intelligence reports to OSS/Washington; trained 215 indigenous agents (many of whom were brought in from enemy territory); air dropped over seventy-four tons of supplies, ammunition, and arms; and conducted 125 SO and SI operations.[6]

Into this morass of "Confusion Beyond Imagination" came Private First Class (PFC) Peter L. White. At the age of eighteen, in August 1944, White entered the Army from Nantucket, Massachusetts. He was inducted in Boston after informing his local draft board that he was volunteering. "I preferred not to wait," said White. After initial processing at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, he was shipped to Fort Riley, Kansas, for training as a cavalryman. Many bemoan the demise of the horse cavalry at the onset of the war, but White was *really* the last class that was actually trained on horseback as "mounted riflemen." He departed Fort Riley for advanced combat training at Fort Ord, California. On 7 February 1945, PFC White departed the states aboard the USNS *General Mann* bound for India. After a layover in Melbourne, Australia, White was shipped to Bombay in March 1945. From there he was sent to a theater replacement depot outside of Calcutta. The trip from Bombay to Calcutta on an Indian troop train was, according to White, "a memorable ordeal



*Lieutenant General Raymond A. Wheeler, U.S. Army, was Deputy SAC, SEA.

This chart reflects the Allied Chain of Command in South East Asia in November 1944 following Lieutenant General Joseph Stilwell's recall. This complex command arrangement for the CBI is why it was often called the "Confusion Beyond Imagination" theater.



The India-Burma Theater 1944–1945.

CBI SSI

SEAC SSI

Detachment 404: Selected Operations in SE Asia

- Operation RIPLEY: In June 1944, an Indonesian agent was landed in Sumatra to collect intelligence. The agent was arrested upon landing, but managed to convince the Japanese to release him. He later provided important intelligence on the Indonesian Republican movement.
- Operation BALMORAL: In September 1944, a team of four American OSS agents and a Malay radio operator were landed in the Mergui Archipelago to establish a coast-watching and weather station. Increased enemy activity caused the team to be withdrawn after five months of successful operations.
- Operation NOAH: In December 1944, a Maritime Unit plan to capture a Chinese Junk, crew it with OSS personnel, and cruise the Malacca Straits to collect intelligence was largely unsuccessful. The unit did manage to establish a coast-watching station that operated for several months.
- Operation CAIRNGORM: In November 1944, a team of three American OSS agents and three Chinese agents were parachuted into Malaya to contact Chinese guerillas. The team was instructed to "remain in the jungle until the end of the war." Incredibly, it did join up with a small band of guerrillas and harassed the Japanese for months. The team suffered no casualties and rejoined Allied forces at the end of the war.
- Operation SALAD: During 1944–1945, seventy-four tons of weapons and equipment were airdropped to the Thai guerillas.
- Arakan Field Unit: In 1944–1945, a 175-man force of Detachment 404 was attached to the XV Indian Corps on the Arakan coast of Burma. The unit passed to the operational control of Detachment 101 when the CBI was reorganized. The AFU conducted numerous short duration Maritime Unit and OG operations before going to Rangoon, Burma, to exploit captured Japanese intelligence. They remained in Rangoon to support OSS operations into Thailand. The AFU was ultimately designated Detachment 505-A.

Private First Class Peter White and Private Eugene Schimdt at China Bay.

due to the sad state of the Indian railcars" and the "rather putrid air that surrounded us throughout the trip."[7]

While White was awaiting orders at the replacement depot, he performed a lot of guard duty, KP, and other mundane "details." These included assisting the local MPs to "clean out the GIs from the brothels and bars" of Calcutta. One day, the young private saw a memo on the bulletin board soliciting "volunteers for hazardous duty." Despite having already learned the age-old soldiers' maxim of never volunteering for anything, "I did anyway," remembered White. "The prospect of remaining any longer in the repo depot was both demoralizing and incomprehensible. I had to find a quicker way to anywhere. I didn't know what the duty was or where I would go, but I did realize that it would get me out of Calcutta faster than waiting for my orders," recalled White. Unbeknownst to White, a simple request to the first sergeant started the process of his matriculation into the OSS and assignment to Detachment 404. A lengthy security questionnaire was followed by an interview with an OSS officer. Then, White and six other selected volunteers from the Calcutta repo depot were sent to the "Racetrack" in Calcutta (literally the city horse-racing track) that housed a small OSS tent city. It was one of the Detachment 505 facilities in Calcutta.[8] Detachment 505 was the logistical hub for Detachment 101 that was fighting in northern Burma. It subsequently became the logistical hub for all OSS detachments in China, Burma, and India.[9]

At the "Racetrack," White and the other volunteers were administratively in-processed and then taken to Hasting's Mills, another OSS camp about eighteen miles from Calcutta. From Dum Dum airfield they were flown

Detachment 404 officers planning an air drop operation into Thailand.

to Colombo, Ceylon, on a C-47 transport plane. Ceylon was the site of all Detachment 404 bases and facilities except the R&A and X-2 operations. These were conducted from New Delhi where they were co-located with Detachment 303. From Colombo, the OSS trainees were taken by truck to Galle, an old Portuguese colonial city on the southwest coast of Ceylon. Galle was the home of Detachment 404's OGs. These OGs were reorganized in the winter of 1944–1945, and the bulk of the operators transferred to Detachment 202 in China. However, White and his comrades received most of their brief training on British and Japanese weapons at Galle from the residual OG cadre. "We were all trained infantrymen so there was little in this training that was difficult or remarkable," White remembered.[10] After a week in Galle, these new OSS recruits were transported to "China Bay," another Det 404 camp near Trincomalee. It was across the harbor from a larger installation housing a Royal Navy base and a Detachment 404 Maritime Unit responsible for maritime sabotage and intelligence operations and agent insertions.[11]

Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten and Cora DuBois, chief of the Det 404 Research and Analysis section, in Kandy, Ceylon.

A typical basha *where teams lived at China Bay.*

At China Bay, White and his team received parachute and other training. Parachute training consisted of platform jumps and parachute landing falls (PLFs) and a version of the 34-foot tower. It also included how to steer the parachutes and how to get out of the parachute harness after landing. They had no practice or training jumps—the first jump would be into combat. Additionally, they were trained on small unit tactics, demolitions, combatives, and jungle/survival training. "We received a specific block of instruction on railroad sabotage—how to derail a train and blow up the tracks," White recalled. Notably, they received no language or communication training. A

OSS Missions and Bases in East Asia. Note: Site Y at Trincomalee was a separate facility for training indigenous agent recruits.

Small boat training at the Detachment 404 OG facility in Galle.

Training on the 60mm mortar training at Galle. Pictured are OSS Detachment 404 members (left to right): Bruce Stone, John Hooker, Edward McGuire, John Cahill, Hess, and George Porter.

radio operator/translator was to be attached to the team later. "The conditions at China Bay were neither luxurious nor wretched. We lived in raised squad huts called 'bashas' that had open windows and palm thatched roofs, and we ate at a consolidated mess because we were on $2.10 per diem. We ate like kings," said White.[12] It was here that White was assigned to a Special Operations team whose mission was to conduct sabotage and unconventional warfare, including the training and leadership of indigenous forces. White's team was led by Captain Norman Farquhar and included Private Ben Luck and Private Eugene Schmidt. The team soon learned that it was training for a mission into Thailand.[13]

The situation in Thailand was much different from that previously encountered by the OSS in enemy-occupied territory in Europe. Instead of resistance movements, there was a "patriotic governmental conspiracy against the Japanese in which most of the key figures of the state were involved."[14] Thailand's status during the war is vaguely analogous to that of Vichy or German-occupied France, and to Hungary—a German ally allowed to retain its own government under quasi-German occupation. It became clear over time however, that a portion of the Thai ruling elite were opposed to Japan and that they hoped to keep Thailand from becoming drawn more deeply into the conflict. These conditions prompted a thorough review of American political and policy issues related to any planned operations in Thailand. Of concern was the fact that Thailand had declared war on the United States after Pearl Harbor as a notional Japanese ally, and that the Japanese military was stationed throughout the country. The British, Americans, and Japanese would dance to a "complicated minuet" around the possibility that the Thai opposition would rise against Japan and force Tokyo to divert badly needed combat troops in order to occupy Thailand and put down any overt resistance."[15]

Thailand was a "black hole" in terms of intelligence. To overcome this lack of intelligence, a team of "Free Thai" (agents recruited from Thai students who were attending university in the United States at the beginning of the war) were trained by the OSS and then infiltrated via China in late 1944. This team discovered that the existing Thai Army, Navy, Air Force, and secret police were viable OSS sources of guerrilla and intelligence forces. Encouraged by the successes of the first team of "Free Thai" inserted into Thailand, General Donovan sent two OSS officers, Major Richard Greenlee and Major John Wester, to Bangkok in January 1945, to exploit these sources and to serve as direct OSS liaison to the Thai government.[16]

Greenlee and Wester were hidden in "plain sight" during the day in a palace adjacent to that of Prince Regent Pridi Phanomyong (codenamed "Ruth"). They quickly discovered that Pridi was the de facto head of the nascent Thai underground. The Prince Regent made it very clear that the Thais were prepared to revolt against the Japanese. However, they needed arms and training, which only the OSS and/or the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) could provide. A long-standing question of British post-war colonial ambitions further complicated matters. Pridi and the OSS officers in Bangkok were convinced that the British seriously harbored designs on Thai territory. Subsequent SOE attempts to allay the fears of the Thais could not convince the Prince Regent otherwise.

Given this pro-U.S. environment, Detachment 404 began planning to establish numerous clandestine airfields and

Prince Regent Pridi Phanomyong, also known as "Ruth."

SO team members in China Bay. Private Ben Luck is kneeling at the right front.

Free Thai members of the OSS DURIAN operation pose in Trincomalee, Ceylon, with their trainers and advisors.

bases throughout Thailand to support the training of 10,000 guerrillas in twelve operating areas. Despite the Prince Regent's enthusiasm to confront the Japanese, he was advised by the OSS liaison officers, Greenlee and Wester, to wait for the planned Allied invasion of Thailand, scheduled for December 1945. This advice was based on the successes achieved by the large Filipino guerrilla army supporting U.S. operations to recapture the Philippines.[17]

The supply of the Thai forces by the OSS was a success with over seventy-four tons of supplies air dropped between February and August 1945. However, the guerrilla training program was less successful. Operation PATTERN sent the first SO team into Thailand in May 1945. The guerrilla training was to be limited in scope and "promote good will" to encourage Thai intelligence sharing. It was really in its infant stages at the time of the Japanese surrender. By the end of the war, only twenty-three American OSS operators were on the ground in Thailand. Despite the small number of OSS personnel on the ground, Detachment 404 managed to plan and execute an operation that capitalized on its close relationship with the Thais. In the confusion of the Japanese surrender, 296 Allied prisoners of war were evacuated from Bangkok by eight aircraft in August 1945.[18]

The dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki caused PFC White's mission to be scrubbed. His team never jumped into Thailand to train and advise guerrillas. White and his teammates, along with the other enlisted men at China Bay, began breaking down the various OSS camps on Ceylon. White, based on the overseas points system, didn't make his way back to the states until February 1946. Despite the fact that the OSS had been ordered disbanded by President Harry S. Truman in October 1945, White was assigned to "Headquarters, OSS, Washington."

Insignia courtesy of Mr. Les Hughes

Free Thai Shoulder Sleeve Insignia worn by those Thai nationals recruited by the OSS in the United States.

Following the presidential directive, large parts of the OSS organization transferred to the War Department and were designated as the "Strategic Services Unit" (SSU). The SSU was created to preserve many of the wartime capabilities built by the OSS. While assigned to Washington, White served as a classified courier and at one point was caught up in an instance of bureaucratic one-upmanship in a general's office. "The aide-de-camp insisted on taking the package and I insisted that the general had to sign for the classified material. I was very nervous, but I knew I was right," said White. "The general signed for the package."[19] After leaving the Army, he attended the University of Arizona, graduated in 1951, and was commissioned as an armor officer (ROTC). He served in Germany and Fort Irwin, California, until 1958, when he joined the Bank of Boston to work in Brazil, Argentina, and Costa Rica.

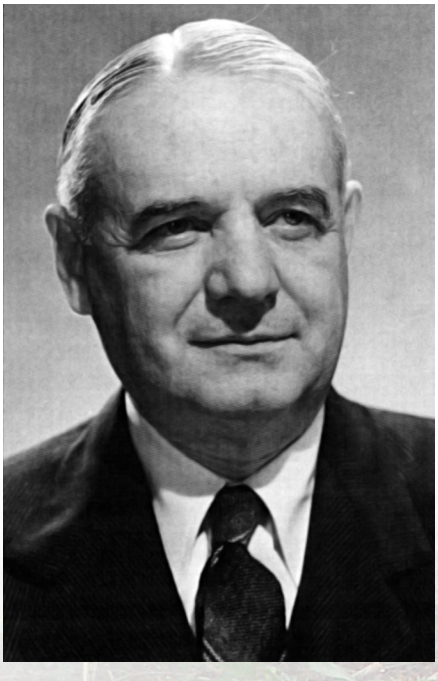
The foresight of the creator of the SSU to preserve OSS wartime capabilities for what became the nation's civilian intelligence agency, the CIA, was matched by U.S. policy toward Thailand during the war. Both would

A British-operated C-47 Dakota being turned around at Phu Khieo airfield in Thailand June 1945.

SO Team YIELD in Thailand August 1945. OSS agents Petty Officer Don Gilbertson (front row second from left) and Captain Van Mumma (second from right). The Thais in the photo were police officers.

pay large dividends for the United States during the immediate post-war period and throughout the Cold War. The OSS presence in Thailand in 1945 and immediately after the war preserved the pro-U.S. feelings. The Thais responded to a "favored nation" status by loyally supporting the United States with ground and naval forces to the UN Command during the Korean War, and ground forces, under the auspices of the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), and bases for U.S. forces in Thailand during the Vietnam War.[20]

In the words of E. Bruce Reynolds, an eminent historian on the OSS in Thailand, ". . . the State Department shared the OSS view that the operations [in Thailand] might serve as the opening wedge for postwar American economic and political influence in Southeast Asia."[21] This truly coordinated wartime political effort set the stage for U.S. postwar policy towards Thailand. Preservation of Thai friendship was ensured by President Dwight Eisenhower's appointment of Major General William "Wild Bill" Donovan, the founder and director of the OSS and the "father of the CIA," to be Ambassador to Thailand in 1953.



U.S. Ambassador to Thailand, William Donovan, circa 1954.

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