

A NOTE ON THE MILITARY PARTICIPATION OF SIAM IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

by

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The outbreak of the First World War did not affect Siam directly because of the great distance from Europe. However, as with the other states of the World, the government of King Rama VI was outraged by Germany's declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare in February 1917. As a result, the Siamese declared war on the Central Powers on 22 July of the same year. A few months later, Siam became the only sovereign state of Asia to send an expeditionary force to Europe during World War I.

One of the first official acts of the Kingdom of Siam upon entering the war was to seize all German ships in the country's ports. These vessels numbered nine of about 1,000 tons each plus a few smaller craft.¹ Additionally, there was a roundup of all nationals of the enemy belligerents. Those arrested were interned first in Siam and later in India.² But not long after the war declaration, the Siamese government moved to take a much more active part in the conflict.

In September, 1917, the Siamese authorities issued a call for volunteers for an expeditionary force to be sent overseas.³ An agreement had been reached with France whereby Bangkok would send a unit consisting of motor transport troops, medical personnel and aviators. A small contingent, but, as Prince Vaidyakara, Secretary of the Siamese Legation in Paris, stated: "... it represents the effort of a people animated by the highest sentiments toward France."⁴

The proposed expeditionary force experienced no shortage of applications and a complete unit was recruited easily. To a man, the regular troops volunteered, as did civilians by the thousands.⁵ Finally, during the first months of 1918, the final selections of personnel were made and a force was assembled. Altogether, 1,200 men were to be sent to France.⁶

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1. *The Statesman's Yearbook 1918*, 1263.
2. "Siam", *Encyclopaedia Britannica 1921*, (New York, 1922), 466.
3. *The Times* (London) 26 September 1917, 6c.
4. *The New York Times* 27 July 1918, 1 : 2.
5. Prince Chula Chakrabongse, *Lords of Life : A History of the Kings of Thailand* (London, 1967), 289.
6. *Area Handbook for Thailand* (Washington, D.C., 1968), 482.

While the Siamese contingent was being recruited, the French military authorities were making arrangements for its arrival. To assist in these preparations, the government of Siam sent a five-man Military Mission to Paris.⁷ Now the composition of the expeditionary force and the logistics were finalized. The Siamese contingent would consist of professional soldiers and all transportation expenses were to be borne by Siam. The French government would feed and maintain the unit and would be reimbursed by Bangkok later. Rations were to be adjusted so that rice would be added to the Siamese allotment.⁸ The aviation contingent was to go to a French military air installation for advanced instruction while the ground force would be sent directly to the front after some preliminary training.

Since the aviation section was such a technical and highly skilled part of the military, the French General Staff and the Legation of Siam were concerned about the Siamese airmen. This force, consisting of 370 men (including 113 pilots),⁹ did have trained flyers. But neither government considered their level of training to be sufficient to meet demands of combat at the front. Therefore, it was decided to determine exactly how competent the pilots were before committing them to action. On their arrival, the flying personnel were to be given medical examinations "with a view to determining, more specifically, whether or not they are susceptible to effects from flying at great altitudes."¹⁰

The impending arrival of the Siamese gave rise to other problems as well. Language promised to be a barrier because none of the members of the contingent spoke French. In addition, the pilots would have to adjust to an entirely different training system.¹¹ Then there was the problem of where to send the Siamese airmen for their advanced instruction because all French military aviation schools were fully engaged in fulfilling the demands of the air units of France. It was finally decided to place the pilots at Istres, near Miramas.¹²

With the uncertainty about the skills of the Siamese pilots came the problem of utilizing them at the front. The *Sous-Secretariat d'Etat de l'Aeronautique Militaire*

7. Etat-Major General de l'Armée, Groupe de l'Avant, 3^e Bureau, I No. 1557 BS/3, Paris, le 24 Janvier 1918; Service Historique De L'Armée De L'Air, 94300 Chateau de Vincennes (Hereafter S.H.A.A.).

8. Ibid.

9. Contingent de troupes siamoises; Liste de l'effectif du contingent siamois; S.H.A.A.

10. Le Sous-Secretaire D'Etat de l'Aeronautique Militaire et Maritime à M. le Colonel, Inspecteur General des Ecoles et Depôts d'Aviation, à Paris, 30 Avril 1918; S.H.A.A.

11. Le Sous-Secretariat D'Etat de l'Aeronautique Militaire et Maritime, 4^e Bureau, Note pour l'Etat-Major de l'Armée—5^e Bureau Interieur, 30 Avril 1918; S.H.A.A.

12. Ibid.

et Maritime suggested the following : "either to place the contingent under the command of the Navy (coast squadrons) or to send them to theatres of operations where the flying altitude does not matter (Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria)." ¹³ But no final decision was made before the Siamese actually arrived in France. The French General Staff preferred to wait until the *Sous-Secretariat* had assessed the capabilities of the pilots. ¹⁴

The Siamese Expeditionary Force landed in France at the end of July 1918. The ground forces underwent brief training and proceeded to the fighting front in mid-September. ¹⁵ All their equipment was provided by the French military authorities. The Siamese personnel themselves wore khaki uniforms similar to those of the British Army. ¹⁶

The motor transport and medical detachments of the Siamese Expeditionary Force reached the front in time to participate in the Champagne and Argonne battles. ¹⁷ The Siamese soldiers gave excellent service in these actions. The force, consisting of 850 men, lost 19 killed. ¹⁸

At about the same time as the Siamese ground units entered combat, some of the airmen were ready also. Consequently, General Phya Bhijai Janridh, Chief of the Siamese Military Mission in France, requested that certain of the aviators be attached to French air squadrons at the front in order for them to gain combat experience. Then these men could return the next spring and form, with the others, an all-Siamese unit. ¹⁹ There was no opposition on the part of the French military authorities to this proposal. The Commandant of the French *l'Armée du Nord Est* replied that the Siamese airmen would be placed in groups of three in French squadrons in an area to be determined soon. ²⁰ However, apparently the only Siamese troops to see combat were those in the ground forces. The airmen were still undergoing training when the Armistice was signed in November 1918.

13. Ibid.

14. L'Etat-Major de l'Armée, 5 Bureau Interieur a Monsieur le Sous-Secretaire d'Etat de l'Aeronautique Militaire et Maritime, 5 Mai 1918; S.H.A.A.

15. *The Statesman's Yearbook 1919*, 1247.

16. *The Times* (London) 9 August 1918, 6c.

17. K. Subamonkala, *La Thaïlande et ses Relations avec la France* (Paris, 1960), 226.

18. Information courtesy of : Major Achara Sukramool, WAC, Sub-Librarian, Cadet School Library, Bangkok, January 5, 1980.

19. General Phya Bhijai Janridh, Chef de la Mission Militaire Siamoise en France à M. Le General Pétain, Commandant en Chef les Armées françaises, G.Q.C., Le 11 Septembre 1918; S.H.A.A.

20. Commandant, L'Armée du Nord Est a General Chef de la Mission Militaire Siamoise, 20 Septembre 1918; S.H.A.A.

After the end of hostilities, the Siamese troops served with the Allied Army of Occupation at Neustade-sur-Arrendt, Germany.²¹ They also participated in the victory parades in the Allied capitals in Europe. Honours accorded the contingent included the French *Croix de Guerre* and the Ramathibodi Decoration awarded by King Rama VI. In Bangkok, the Volunteer Soldiers Monument was erected in memory of those killed overseas.²² The Siamese Expeditionary Force returned home in 1919.

21. Subamonkala, *op. cit.*, 226.

22. Courtesy Major Sukramool, Cadet School Library.