

## You call this a Vacation?

*By Howie Flomberg*

It was 1968. I was in the Air Force and stationed at Stewart Air Force Base in Newburgh N.Y. I enjoyed a three-day weekend by taking a bus and the subway to my home in Queens. I called my barracks from the bus terminal when I got back to see if I could get someone to give me a lift back to base. I was not prepared for the response:

“Hey it’s John Wayne, Flomberg you’re going to war.”

“Just stay right there, hero, someone will be right out to pick you up.”

A loaded station wagon pulled into the terminal – horns blaring and someone blowing on a Ferkokter (crappy) bugle. Trepidation doesn’t begin to define how I felt getting into the vehicle.

One of the guys worked in the office and had seen my orders come through. I was headed to Southeast Asia. Actually 1968 was the year that was the year that someone in the Pentagon decided to screw with me. I spent the winter in lovely Minneapolis training. Ah, the weather in Minneapolis is either Hot and Wet, or Cold and Wet. I got there for cold and wet. As the winter faded into hot and wet, got on an Airplane and off to Southeast Asia.

I was stationed in Thailand. The three months in Bangkok was followed by nine months in Korat. Thailand, originally Siam, is delightful. Actually if one ignores a regularly scheduled trip to another nearby country, the year was a vacation. Thailand is a country with a history that dwarfs ours. Thailand’s history is as old as humanity.

After I got there I was walking through Bangkok. As I crossed a busy street I accidentally brushed against another person. Out of instinct I said, “Excuse Me.” The person I had brushed against said – in New York accented English replied “No Sweat.” Then I realized where I was. I turned and realized that the New Yorker was in fact a Buddhist Monk. He was short and slight, wearing an orange robe. My look of incredulity must have set him off because he was overcome with laughter.

I offered to buy the young man a cup of coffee or tea and we retired to a nearby hotel. The young man – whose name I forget – was born in The Bronx. His father was in the Thai Diplomatic Corps. He went to New York public schools, hence the accent. Every young Buddhist man spends a year in a monastery. When he was of age and to fulfill his religious responsibility he returned to Bangkok. We met regularly for coffee and discussed religion and philosophy.

We live in a Judeo-Christian society and Buddhism tends to be foreign to us. Buddhism is based on an 8-fold philosophy that emphasizes morality. Judaism places its emphasis on the 10-commandments that also emphasizes morality. The first thing I did when I got in country was take a course on the Thai language. I still speak enough Thai to get along in a Thai restaurant. With the exception of side trips to a country where they threw high explosives at me, the year in Thailand was a trip that was fascinating and educational.