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## A 50-year mystery: The curious case of silk tycoon Jim Thompson

**The silk tycoon vanished without a trace while on vacation in Malaysia in 1967. Now, 50 years on, Thompson's mysterious disappearance and his life, which was as colourful as the Thai silk he sold, maintain an enduring presence in Thailand.**

Bangkok (dpa) - On March 26, 1967, Jim Thompson, then one of the most famous Americans living in Asia, took a stroll in West Malaysia while on holiday and never came back.

Thompson vanished without a trace at the age of 61. Now, 50 years on, his mysterious disappearance and his life, which was as colourful as the Thai silk he sold, maintain an enduring presence in Thailand.

A World War II spy with the US Office of Strategic Services (OSS), a forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), as well as an architect, a socialite and an avid art collector - Thompson was many things.

But he was best known as the "king of Thai silk" for his revival of the dying silk weaving industry in Thailand, having co-founded in 1948 the Thai Silk Company, a business that continues to thrive to this day.

Declared dead in absentia by a Thai court in 1974, the Delaware-born graduate of Princeton University disappeared in Cameron Highlands, Malaysia's most extensive hill station. The mystery continues to draw great interest among scholars and those curious about Cold War politics in South-East Asia.

"I think the case still draws interest because it is one of the top 10 individual disappearances in the world, and everyone loves a mystery," said Llewellyn Toulmin, a travel columnist and author who conducted extensive research on Thompson's disappearance.

Toulmin laid out a dozen possible scenarios of what could have happened to Thompson - among them a CIA assassination fueled by Thompson's sympathy toward Vietnamese rebels, a murder by communist terrorists or business rivals, a row with a Thai senior official over his art collection, and Thompson's numerous love affairs.

But all of these possibilities seem "unlikely," Toulmin said, who pointed to the greater likelihood of a "tragic" accident in the Malaysian jungle.

"The most probable cause is a simple accident in the jungle - tripping over a root and breaking his neck, falling down a ravine, et cetera - since [Thompson] was known to like to hike cross-country, off-trail," Toulmin said.

"An alternate possible cause is a gall bladder attack, which led to being stranded in the jungle, and then perhaps death by exposure," he said, adding that Thompson did not bring with him his medicine used to treat a serious gall bladder condition.

Thompson also left behind his wallet, money, passport, driving license and cigarettes, according to Toulmin.

The disappearance led to an extensive search effort involving nearly 1,500 people and lasting 11 days. But they found no trace of him - and no remains have been found to this day.

Only three years after he founded the Thai Silk Company, its products were featured in the 1951 musical production of "The King and I" in New York City.

Among Thompson's famous clientele were Princess Grace Kelly and Queen Sirikit of Thailand.

The company has expanded from 100 employees in 1967 to more than 3,000 today, with the "Jim Thompson" brand known around the world.

Forty retail shops and showrooms currently operate in Thailand, Singapore, Germany, France, Britain and the United States.

Thompson's traditional Thai house, now a museum operated by the James H.W. Thompson Foundation, is another of the silk tycoon's popular legacies. It welcomed more than 30,000 visitors last year.

During his lifetime, Thompson was known to entertain many high-profile guests at his house - among them the silent film star Charlie Chaplin.

Thompson bought six traditional Thai wooden houses from Bangkok and the ancient capital of Ayutthaya and reassembled them in 1959 in the heart of Bangkok beside a canal.

The unique teak houses in the 1,600-square-metre lush complex contain many Asian artworks and antiques Thompson collected over the years, including paintings, sculptures and porcelain pieces.

After enlisting for the Delaware National Guard in 1940, a radical move by someone from an affluent background, Thompson joined the OSS at the height of World War II, a decision that landed him in Thailand in 1945.

"I think he didn't want to go back to his life in America. There wasn't that much pulling him back there," said Joshua Kurlantzick, author of *The Ideal Man: The Tragedy of Jim Thompson and the American Way of War*.

"He was intrigued by Thailand, and also thought the US had a role to play in helping South-East Asian nations develop and become democracies," Kurlantzick said.

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(dpa is an international press wire service based in Germany)