

Travel Tales

Searchers for the “Silk King of Thailand”— Generals, Gurkhas, Boy Scouts, Dogs, and 118 Psychics

Part 2

by

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Last month we learned about the exotic life and mysterious disappearance of Jim Thompson, the “Silk King of Thailand,” in the beautiful Cameron Highlands of Malaysia in March 1967. This month we will focus on the massive search for Thompson – probably the largest search for an individual on land in south-east Asian history.



The Moonlight Bungalow was the “last known point” (LKP) for Jim Thompson

The search began within hours of Jim’s disappearance. A hasty search in the late afternoon and evening of Easter Sunday, March 26 was led by Thompson’s doctor, who coincidentally was staying in the area. Local residents, schoolchildren, police and even hospital patients participated and searched the roads and trails around the Moonlight Bungalow, located high on an isolated hill, surrounded by thick jungle. Over the next two days the search force swelled to 400 persons, including Malaysian Police Field Forces, Malaysian Army soldiers, British Army volunteers, Gurkha soldiers, US Embassy officials from Kuala Lumpur, Boy Scouts, orang asli (local aborigine) trackers, and many others.

Mr. Perak Aleyak, now a commission agent in the area, was a 17-year-old Boy Scout in 1967. He and his Troop were called out and sent to search the trails around the nearby 6923-foot Gunung Irau Mountain. Perak said, “We were led by five orang asli trackers, and we walked the main trails. If we found a side trail or animal trail, we would go down it, looking for evidence of Thompson, and calling out ‘Mr. Jim! Mr. Jim!’”



Perak Aleyak searched for Jim Thompson in 1967 as a Boy Scout

Captain Mokh Ta Mohammad was a 23-year-old Malaysian Army Lieutenant in 1967, and one of the leaders of the search. His team had line abreast searchers, spaced 40 yards apart, combing the area in a three mile radius around the Moonlight Bungalow, the “last known point.” He also called in bloodhound-type tracking dogs to search the grounds of the Bungalow, overlooking the tiny resort town of Tanah Rata. Mohammad said, “Three bloodhound-style dogs found scent trails on the grounds of the house, but could not find a scent trail going down the only access road or into the jungle.” Based on this evidence (reported here for the first time), the search leaders began to suspect that Thompson had left the area in a car, which would have broken the scent trail. (But none of the occupants or servants at the Bungalow heard or seen such a car.)

US Army Brigadier General Edwin Black, who had introduced Thompson to his World War II bride, arrived after several days with his aides, including Lt. Denis Horgan, later a well-known newspaperman. Horgan told me, “One or two Malaysian military helicopters made brief overflights, but that wasn’t helpful because of the thickness of the [jungle] vegetation. There are reports that we had US helicopters, but that definitely wasn’t the case. The jungle was thick enough that searchers, and presumably Jim, would have stuck close to the trails. You could not run a line of bush-beaters in there.”



Captain Mohammad of the Malaysian Army, search leader in 1967, points to the Moonlight Bungalow.

The official search continued for 11 days, far longer than most such efforts, which usually conclude within 24 hours. Sporadic searches continued for months. Altogether, I estimate that about 1448 person days of searching was delivered, a very large number. (No previous estimate of the total size of the search effort has ever been attempted.)

As the search efforts wound down, things got weird. Over 118 mystics, soothsayers and psychics showed up to give their visions of where Thompson was – and all disagreed. Many set off firecrackers in the jungle, to drive off the evil spirits that had kidnapped Jim.

The most famous psychic in the world, Peter Hurkos of Holland, arrived on scene. After walking around the Bungalow while muttering, he declared that Thompson had met a man on the lawn, walked down the access road, was knocked out by morphine and kidnapped by the man and 13 soldiers, and was now being held in Cambodia, 600 miles away across the Gulf of Siam.

From my analysis of contemporary FBI documents (obtained via the Freedom of Information Act), it appears that the FBI felt that Hurkos was a “known charlatan,” but the Bureau carefully did not inform General Black of this fact. So General Black and psychic Hurkos subsequently cooperated in a lengthy and fruitless investigation into the Cambodia angle.

Thompson was supposedly sighted in Tahiti on May 27, two months after the disappearance. A confidential State Department report, since declassified, states that Edward Pollitz, a “responsible American citizen” who “claims to have known Thompson for a number of years,” saw Jim in the Hotel Tahiti and shouted out to him. But Thompson and an accompanying “Caucasian woman...drove away in a black sedan.” Pollitz admitted it could be a case of mistaken identity, but was “very positive” about his impressions. This report was apparently circulated to Bill Colby, CIA chief for SE Asian affairs, and later a famous director of the CIA.

Next month we will analyze the quality of the search, and calculate the “probability of success” of the effort, using formulas employed by the US National Association for Search and Rescue.

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Lew Toulmin lives in Silver Spring. His massive report on the Jim Thompson disappearance, including hundreds of pages of primary source documents and interviews with persons never before contacted, can be downloaded for free from his website at:

http://www.themosttraveled.com/new/new_land.html.

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