

## Travel Tales

# The Exotic Life and Mysterious Disappearance of the “Silk King of Thailand”

## Part 1

by

**Lew Toulmin**

Doubtless you have heard about the two tragic Malaysian aviation mysteries in the last fourteen months. But you may not recall the original mystery of all mysteries in Malaysian (and Thai) history – the disappearance of Jim Thompson, the “Silk King of Thailand,” in the Cameron Highlands of central Malaysia in March, 1967. This led to the biggest land search in Malaysian (and perhaps south-east Asian) history.

The case made headlines around the world, since Jim Thompson was the most famous American in Thailand at the time, was a decorated intelligence and military officer, had served in the World War II predecessor to the CIA, was a CIA asset after the war, had resurrected the Thai silk industry, and lived an amazingly glamorous lifestyle in his famous house/museum in Bangkok, entertaining movie stars and world leaders almost every night.



*Jim Thompson rose from private to Lt. Col. in the OSS in World War II*

Jim was on vacation in the Highlands, apparently went for an afternoon hike in the jungle on Easter Sunday, and disappeared without a trace.

I have been working in my off-hours for the last two years on this case and the search, tackling it from a scientific search and rescue (SAR) point of view, which has never been done before. This month I will tell you about Thompson’s life, and then later about my analysis of the search.

Jim Thompson was born in Greenville, Delaware in 1906, to a distinguished family. He attended Princeton and the University of Pennsylvania, then practiced architecture and interior design until World War II. He enlisted in the Coastal Artillery Command as a National Guard private in 1940, and was promoted to Lieutenant a year later. Since he spoke fluent French, he was recruited by a friend in 1943 into the Office of Strategic Services -- the OSS -- the wartime predecessor of the CIA.

In the OSS, Thompson parachuted into occupied France on missions of spying and sabotage. Then he served in the Balkans on secret operations, and trained in Ceylon for service in Thailand. As the war ended, he became the OSS chief of station in Bangkok for about a year, resigning in January 1947, having risen from private to Lt. Colonel in just six years. He was awarded five Bronze Stars for his OSS exploits.

After the war, Thompson began resurrecting the almost-dead Thai silk industry. He founded a company which still exists, and through clever and incessant marketing took it from nothing to a multi-million dollar operation employing over 3000 workers. He became known as the “Silk King of Thailand.” He collected Asian art and antique houses, and assembled six of the houses into a fabulous home and museum, stuffed with art, which is one of the top tourist attractions in Thailand.



*The Jim Thompson house museum and art collection is one of the top attractions in Bangkok*

Each evening after work he entertained lavishly, and virtually everyone of importance in Thailand or who came through Bangkok in the 1950s and 1960s was his guest. Notable guests or customers included Eleanor Roosevelt, Truman Capote, Adlai Stevenson, Tennessee Williams, Katherine Hepburn, Vice President and Lady Bird Johnson, the Kennedys, the Eisenhowers, the Du Ponts, various Rockefellers, Elizabeth Taylor and the Queen of Thailand.

Thompson also had time to continue his secret activities. According to US State Department files, he was accused in the 1950s by the French government of running military supplies to resistance groups in Cambodia. It seems apparent that Thompson was a CIA asset (but not



*Girl spins Thai silk at the Jim Thompson house*

officer) during this period, working under CIA direction.

As the Vietnam War began, Thompson's connections with the CIA weakened, and he may even have opposed the war and antagonized the CIA, although some of his friends dispute this. Thompson accumulated various enemies, including the Director of the Thai Fine Arts department, who accused Jim of looting Thai art, not rescuing it, from up-country sites, and who seized three valuable Buddha heads from Thompson. Jim had a long public affair with Irena Yost, the wife of the distinguished diplomat, Ambassador Charles Yost. Jim befriended and supported a deposed Prime Minister of Thailand, antagonizing the Thai police

and intelligence services. And his successful silk business made him a rival of other silk vendors, especially the powerful wife of another former Prime Minister.

In March 1967 Jim Thompson was 61. Despite his glamorous life, he was somewhat depressed, out of shape, and taking medications for painful intermittent gall bladder attacks and amoebic dysentery. To take a break, he went with a long-time female associate on a short vacation to the Cameron Highlands in north central Malaysia. They stayed with two friends at an attractive house, the Moonlight Bungalow, on a steep hill overlooking the small resort town and the dense surrounding jungle. On Easter Sunday, March 26, the four friends went to church, then a picnic, and returned to the Bungalow. All but Jim took a nap. He apparently sat for a while on the verandah of the Bungalow, smoking a cigar, then went out for an afternoon walk.

Jim Thompson, the "Silk King of Thailand" and the most famous American in southeast Asia, was never seen again. No trace was ever found.

Next month I will describe the 1967 search for Jim Thompson, and my own search to figure out what caused his disappearance.

\* \* \*

Lew Toulmin grew up in Thailand from 1959 to 1965, and worked on a project in Thai government reform in 2002. He lives in Silver Spring.