



**Larry Cashman, the Unscrupulous  
Scoundrel**

**Chapter 1**

**Nong Samet**

How a lazy, unscrupulous scoundrel like Larry Cashman found himself serving as a distinguished employee of the US Embassy in Jakarta, Indonesia in 1982 is proof beyond doubt that you can fool a lot of people most of the time. In Volume 1 of the Cashman Chronicles I have recounted how, despite my countless personality flaws, the absence of any ethical or moral compass congesting the cranial cavity of my brain, and my abundant intellectual shortcomings, which are too numerous to recount at this point in the narrative, I nevertheless managed to escape from my miserable existence in New York City to find my way to New Mexico, Hawaii, and Thailand. None of these adventures would have been possible without my beloved wife Sabrina, who kept her eye on the target and made sure that my stupidity and lack of judgment would not hinder the journey.

My stupidity and lack of judgment, however, have been amply complemented by what can only be considered "uncanny good luck". How fortuitous was it that an eminent professor like Martinus Papadopoulos, at the University of Hawaii,<sup>1</sup> would have enough mischievous DNA in his genome to not only tolerate an unorthodox bounder like me; but also act as my personal "deus ex machine" by taking the exceedingly high-end risk to send me to Thailand, of all places, to conduct the fieldwork for my Masters Degree in Public Health! Subsequently meeting Somchai Wongsawat, the founder and CEO of the Association for Population Innovation (API) in the City of Angels [aka Bangkok], was pure serendipity. Then, by chance, the Cambodian refugee crisis descended upon Thailand and Somchai needed to find a *farang*<sup>2</sup> who could speak Thai; and accordingly offered me my first job in International Public Health to deal with this emergency situation. Despite my unconventional duties at the Training Center for Population Innovation (TCPI)<sup>3</sup>, Evie Sumarsono from the Indonesian Family Planning Federation (IFPF)

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 10 Volume 1 of the Cashman Chronicles

<sup>2</sup> "Farang" is the pejorative term used by the Thais for foreigners of European ancestry. See Chapter 11 Volume 1 of the Cashman Chronicles

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 12 Volume 1 of the Cashman Chronicles for an explanation of those unconventional duties.

ignored my roguish qualities and focused instead on the only two skills I actually possess in this world – my knack for quickly learning new languages and my innate ability to bullshit – and offered me a position working with the Indonesian Family Planning Federation funded by the US Embassy in Jakarta.<sup>4</sup> In brief, if Larry Cashman has to choose between being good at something or being lucky, he will opt for the latter every time.

Indonesia had many attractions for Sabrina and me. It was a vast and diverse archipelago nation containing more than 17,000 islands inhabited by 300 different ethnic groups, each with their own language and culture. One of those islands was Bali, the exotic, mystical Hindu-Buddhist isle that Sabrina and I had often fantasized about visiting someday. We promised ourselves that, if we ever went to Indonesia, Bali was the first place we would visit. Of even greater importance, as a card carrying member of the US Embassy community, Sabrina, Carmencita<sup>5</sup>, and I would be living in a comfortable home with a driver and servants like that guy I saw in Marrakech while I was disgorging the contents from my large intestine thanks to a bowl of salmonella-infested snails.<sup>6</sup> Ah, what could I say other than "no more roach-infested hovels...no more half-finished dives with cheap, chain-link fencing where there should be walls...". Yes, Larry Cashman was clearly moving up in the world.

Before leaving Thailand and heading to Indonesia, however, I had some unfinished business. I still had to find my replacement at API, the Thai NGO where I worked. Somchai Wongsawat had been very helpful to Sabrina and me during our four years in Bangkok. Somchai found it useful to have a *farang* like me on API's staff. I didn't want to leave him in the lurch when I left, so I needed to find a replacement with the same skill set as me; namely a good line of bullshit, an ability to speak Thai, and enough swagger and panache to get by in a pinch!

First and foremost, however, I had to nail down the position in Indonesia, and finally negotiate and sign a contract with the US Embassy in Jakarta. Having Evie Sumarsono offer me a position as the US Embassy's Training Advisor to the IFPF's Center for Education and Training was one thing. Signing a contract with the US Embassy in Jakarta was another ball game altogether. Positions like this were highly desirable because they came with all the bells and whistles of an expatriate hire that included very competitive salaries, as well as a long list of free amenities that covered housing, schooling for children at the International School, shipment of household effects, health insurance, life insurance, a diplomatic passport, and last but not least "membership in the official US Embassy community." These positions had to be advertised, and qualified applicants were aggressively recruited. I should have started worrying when I saw the words "qualified applicants."

To make matters worse, I had deluded myself into thinking that I was some superstar "*phenom*" of the international development community, and that the US Embassy in Jakarta was lucky to get me. Once again hubris and an inflated opinion of my meager and questionable skills would get me into trouble.

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<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 12 Volume 1 of the Cashman Chronicles for a description of these events.

<sup>5</sup> My lovely daughter Carmencita was born in New Mexico. See Chapter 8 Volume 1.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 3, Volume 1.

In fact I was the poster boy for the Dunning Kruger effect<sup>7</sup> before it was even formally recognized in 1999. Despite overestimating my substantial deficiencies in technical knowledge and expertise over and over, and getting into trouble for it again and again, I was about to engage in another round of fanciful delusions once more. As you continue to read my narrative, you, the reader, will observe that this would not be the last time Larry Cashman ["C'est Moi"] would harbor such illusions.

Not long after the Indonesia opportunity arose, another job possibility, in Sri Lanka, began knocking at my door. The same sequence of events resulted in this opportunity; namely some Sri Lankan participants attending Somchai's Training Center for Population Innovation courses were duly impressed with my mellifluous bullshit and Thai language abilities, and inquired if I wanted to work in Sri Lanka. That this offer did not come with a definite position and/or firm offer of employment, as the Indonesian job did, was immaterial to the budding superstar. I had convinced myself that, with serious employment opportunities in two countries, I was a coveted commodity that any country would be lucky to have. Such pretensions unleashed an unwarranted pomposity that only a loser like Larry Cashman could affect.

My sense of self-importance became so acute that, when the deadline for submitting my application to the US Embassy in Indonesia approached, I naturally procrastinated. "They're lucky to get someone like me," I reasoned indignantly. "They should be soliciting an application from me rather than vice versa. If they're not careful, I might go to Sri Lanka."

Three days before the application deadline, I received a phone call. It was Dr. P, my professor and mentor at the University of Hawaii, calling from Indonesia. "Where is your application for the US Embassy position in Jakarta? The deadline for receiving applications closes in three days. They already have 12 applicants."



**US Embassy Jakarta, Indonesia**

There was urgency, impatience, and anger in his voice, not dissimilar to his frustrations with me when I was his student. Dr. P had spent many years working in Indonesia and was highly respected by both the Indonesian government and the US Embassy. During summer breaks at the University of Hawaii, he returned to the US Embassy in Jakarta as a consultant to its Health and Population Office. Dr. P was in fact calling me from the Embassy. "You fool...don't you realize that you have the inside track for the job. Send your application immediately." Dr. P was obviously pissed with my latest shenanigans.

And then the neural connection between my brain and my mouth misfired again. Sensing his ire, I should have kept my big mouth shut and acquiesced. But I was a perceived big shot now, so I replied, "I

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<sup>7</sup> In their landmark 1999 study titled, "Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments", Dunning and Kruger described the psychological phenomenon which leads incompetent people to overestimate their ability because they can't grasp how much they don't know.

have another job offer in Sri Lanka that I want to consider. If the Embassy in Jakarta wants me so badly, shouldn't they be contacting me?"

Well, my rejoinder unleashed a string of expletives, profanities, and epithets that even made my ears ring.

"Cashman...you are an asshole of the highest order. I don't know why I waste my time with you. You think you're so fucking smart. You think you're such a valued commodity. The only reason Evie Sumarsono offered you that job is because you impressed her with your prodigious line of bullshit; and because I vouched for your dubious skills when she and her colleagues at the Indonesian Family Planning Federation found out you had been my student. The only reason that the US Embassy would consider hiring someone like you, with your unimpressive resume and meager professional experience, is because I assured them you could do the job; and because your salary history will likely be a fraction of the other blowhards who applied for the job."

I could imagine the veins pulsating in his neck, just as they did when I was his student. "So you have a job opportunity in Sri Lanka!!!" he continued. "Is there a position? With what agency, may I ask, will you be working? And does this prestigious position happen to be funded? Or is it simply another one of your pipe dreams to stroke your ego? The position in Indonesia is real, and it is funded with real money. If you don't screw it up, you can have it. I have gone out on a limb for you Cashman. Now send your application immediately!!" When Dr. P spoke like this, I knew to keep my mouth shut. I submitted my application for the job. It arrived right before the deadline.

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When it came to puncturing my inflated ego, Dr. P didn't mince words. He knew my many personality flaws intimately, especially my gratuitous self-importance and unrealistic assessment of my own skills. After spending so much time with me, he should have beaten Dunning and Kruger in describing the phenomenon of imbeciles who overestimate their abilities. When he spoke with such brusque urgency, you better believe that Larry Cashman listened!

Dr. P's admonishment left me personally devastated. From being an apparent superstar, I was suddenly relegated to being the nondescript loser I had always been. At least Dr. P's criticism had brought me back to reality. I was lucky to get the job in Indonesia. I would keep my head down, follow the rules, and take the job if it was offered.

You may ask why a distinguished professor with a lofty international reputation like Dr. P would take such a risk to secure a sought-after position in Indonesia for an untested and unreliable character like me. Dr. P was a strategic thinker and he played the long game. Once ensconced in my position with the US Embassy in Indonesia, I would become an integral part of a grand scheme he had been hatching for years. But that story must wait for a future chapter.

These latest developments, however, left me facing the second hurdle before leaving Thailand – finding my replacement at API. This problem turned out to be considerably easier to solve than I thought.

I was sitting in my office a week or so after Dr. P's phone call, when I heard a booming voice in the hall screaming "Where is Cashman? I heard Larry Cashman works here. Where can I find Cashman?"

When someone is looking for me, my first inclination is to either find a good place to hide or, if that is not possible, to cut bait and run. You never can tell...it might be the police! Or someone I owe money to! Or some authority figure whose hokey rules I had broken! But this guy was close by and his exuberance was freaking out the Thais. I rushed out of my office to find a tall, good-looking *farang*, with long wavy brown hair who was already chatting up the Thai ladies. When he saw me, he stopped dead in his tracks. "Are you Larry Cashman? Dr. P told me to find you. I'm Tim O'Riordan."

That's right, the same Tim O'Riordan from the League of Distinguished Knaves at the University of Hawaii School of Public Health.<sup>8</sup> Dr. P told me to find each of these characters because we shared many of the same attributes – and unfortunately a number of the same idiosyncrasies. I had already met Pete Lockery, the charter member of The League of Distinguished Knaves, in Thailand, and he was eccentric in spades.<sup>9</sup> O'Riordan was equally unconventional. He was a rascal and mischief maker, two qualities I could appreciate and admire. What made O'Riordan unique was his affinity for the ladies. He was a womanizer, a flirt, a Don Juan extraordinaire. He was also an expert in infectious tropical diseases. When he found out about the research I was doing on Schistosomiasis in the Cambodian refugee camps,<sup>10</sup> he wanted a piece of that action. He was willing to tolerate the other features of the job – especially the field trips to Patpong and Soi Cowboy<sup>11</sup> – if he could participate in the Schistosomiasis research.

It should come as no surprise that Tim O'Riordan and Larry Cashman hit it off immediately. We were both lazy, disinterested scammers with an uncanny ability to get into trouble. Where we parted company was the womanizing. O'Riordan and I would hang out together all day discussing my work and the best way to do as little as possible. After work we would drink Mekong whiskey with our Thai colleagues and frequent the great restaurants of Bangkok. Then I would go home to spend the remainder of the evening with Sabrina and Carmencita, while O'Riordan would start partying. First he would frequent the strip clubs and sex shows. Nothing was too raunchy for him. Then he would hit a few bars. When he walked in, the girls would gravitate to him like a magnet. There was nothing they liked more than a tall good-looking *farang* who was more than happy to spend his money on their particular skills. Invariably O'Riordan would end up at the Thermae Massage Parlor every night, where he would drink and

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<sup>8</sup> See Chapter 10 Volume 1 of the Cashman Chronicles for a description of the exploits of the University of Hawaii's League of Distinguished Knaves – Pete Lockery, Tim O'Riordan, and Seamus Campbell

<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 11 Volume 1 of the Cashman Chronicles for the exploits of Pete Lockery

<sup>10</sup> One of my colleagues from Mahidol University School of Public Health had found the parasite that causes the disease Schistosomiasis during a routine stool culture. In terms of impact, Schistosomiasis is second only to malaria as the most devastating global parasitic disease. The parasite that transmits Schistosomiasis lives in snail *hosts* before infecting humans. Thailand was Schistosomiasis-free in 1981, but the intermediate host snails could be found in abundance in the vicinity of the refugee camps. If the parasite found in the refugee population found its way to the snail population surrounding the camps, it would propagate and cause a public health crisis. The public health emergency plus the political fallout of Cambodian refugees bringing a feared tropical disease to Thailand enabled our research team, of which I was an integral part, to extract substantial grants from UNHCR to identify the prevalence of Schistosomiasis among the Cambodian refugee population, and institute public health control measure to contain the disease in the refugee camps.

<sup>11</sup> Patpong and Soi Cowboy were two of the most popular red light districts in Bangkok. See Chapter 12 Volume 1 of the Cashman Chronicles for a more fulsome explanation of the array of activities that took place there.



**O’Riordan could customarily be found at 3 AM enjoying the nightlife at the Thermae Massage Parlor**

fraternize with the girls until the wee hours. If you wanted to find Tim O’Riordan at 3 AM in Bangkok, you simply went to the Thermae.<sup>12</sup>

Above all, O’Riordan wanted to go to the refugee camps. He thrived on intrigue. He was attracted to places where peril lurked around every corner. He was a risk-taking junkie. What had more intrigue than huge refugee camps near the Thai-Cambodian border, where the Thai and Vietnamese armies faced off, while the Khmer Rouge and various Cambodian rebel groups skirmished in between the two opposing adversaries? In O’Riordan’s mind the

refugee camps, and especially the rebel settlements situated right up on the border, epitomized intrigue. He wanted to go there as soon as possible.

This was another area where O’Riordan and I most definitely parted company. I’m a coward by nature and inclination. I hate taking risks and similarly loathe intrigue. I run at the first sign of trouble. I avoid danger at all costs. And the summer of 1981 was a particularly dangerous time to be found in the proximity of the Thai-Cambodian border. The Khmer Rouge were repeatedly probing the Vietnamese Army’s perimeter, drawing artillery fire that occasionally hit Thai Army positions, eliciting a response from the Thai Army that threatened to escalate into a major cross-border incident. The Cambodian rebel groups on the border were primarily bandits and outlaws who made mischief wherever they could in order to extort bribes to keep them quiet. The camps and the entire border area between Thailand and Cambodia were a seething cauldron of international intrigue in 1981. I wanted to stay as far away as possible.

There was only one problem. I still had responsibilities in the refugee camps, primarily as the chief investigator on the Schistosomiasis research project. New cases were being found daily. The Mahidol University researchers were collecting thousands of stool samples every day, which had to be transported to Bangkok for microscopic examination. Sooner or later I had to get the researchers to the camps to pick up the accumulating samples. O’Riordan knew this. He was chomping at the bit for some action. So he waited and bided his time because he knew, eventually, I had to go to the camps.

When I could avoid it no longer, I acknowledged the inevitable, and planned a trip to Khao-I-Dang, the largest camp with 140,000 Cambodian refugees, located only three kilometers from the Cambodian border. My job was to secure the clearances we needed to pass Thai military checkpoints to reach the camps, and escort the team to the border. I never had any problems obtaining passes to clear the checkpoints. I was good friends with the Task Force 80 commandos, the Thai Special Forces unit responsible for security in the refugee camps; the result of many evenings drinking Mekong whiskey and

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<sup>12</sup> O’Riordan had lived in Bangkok as a teenager, and returned frequently for visits. Cashman and O’Riordan met on one of those return visits.

bullshitting with the Task Force 80 rangers.<sup>13</sup> When I went to their headquarters this time, they were very reluctant to issue passes because of the tense and potentially dangerous border situation. They finally relented, but urged caution.

I didn't like this one bit, and went through my usual shenanigans to avoid the trip. I feigned illness. I alleged that Sabrina wouldn't let me go. I even claimed that my fragile daughter Carmencita had malaria and needed her father at home. My colleagues from Mahidol University had heard all of my excuses before and naturally ignored them. They had a shit-load of stool samples to pick up. In case you didn't know, "shit stinks", and the longer it lays around in the hot blazing sun "the more it stinks"! Accordingly, we had to get to the camps, and pronto!

When the fateful day for our departure finally arrived I was depressed, while O'Riordan seemed ecstatic. The military situation at the border was deteriorating, and the political situation inside Thailand was tenuous. Elements of the Thai military were becoming impatient with the Thai government, urging a more confrontational posture with Vietnam. Historically, Thai military impatience was a precursor to Thai military interference in domestic politics. The tense military and political standoff left everyone flummoxed. No one was more discombobulated than me.

We left Bangkok at 6 AM for the four hour drive to the border in two vehicles, one for the Mahidol researchers and one for O'Riordan and me. Normally Bangkok's hustle and bustle started very early, with vendors crowding markets and vehicles of all sizes, shapes, and colors, jockeying for position on Bangkok's teeming streets. That morning, however, it was eerily quiet in Bangkok. We sailed down Sukhumvit Road and were on the highway to the border in no time. "At this pace maybe we can get in and out of Khao-I-Dang in a day," I thought. "The less time spent in dicey places, the better."

The trip to the border was uneventful, until we reached the first checkpoint. It was vacant. There were no soldiers in sight. This was most unusual. Usually the checkpoints were packed with vehicles and soldiers checking documents (and extracting bribes in the process). Today it was empty. We proceeded to the next checkpoint and, sure enough, it was vacant as well. When this occurred, I should have known something was amiss, and directed the drivers to turn around and return to Bangkok. But the researchers needed to collect their shit, so we pressed on.

The third checkpoint was a fork in the road. If you headed left, you went to Khao-I-Dang. If you went right, you would be on the Thai-Cambodian border in less than half a kilometer. This was the most heavily guarded checkpoint. Very few vehicles were allowed to pass to the border.

Astonishingly the third checkpoint had been left unguarded too.<sup>14</sup> The road to the encampments on the border was wide open. Something was definitely wrong. I wanted to turn around and get back to Bangkok. The Mahidol researchers were unambiguous. "We have to go to Khao-I-Dang to pick up the stool samples."

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<sup>13</sup> See Chapter 11, Volume 1 of the Cashman Chronicles.

<sup>14</sup> When this excursion was over, we learned that there had been a coup d'état in Thailand on the day we left for the border. The Thai Army of the East, which policed the Cambodian border, and which included Task Force 80, had left their positions to invade Bangkok and take over the Thai Government. The entire border was unprotected. We were in a massive no man's land.

O’Riordan was overjoyed. “I can’t believe our luck. Let’s go to the border camps.” The possibility of going into Cambodia had piqued his desire for intrigue and danger. I thought he might actually come in his pants.

I rejected that idea immediately. “No way do we continue. Under normal circumstances, when there are Thai Special Forces here, it’s a hornet’s nest at the border. Without the Thai military, it’s a no-man’s land. We’re going to Khao-I-Dang.” The Mahidol researchers took the left fork and headed to Khao-I-Dang.

O’Riordan didn’t like that at all. Then I discovered, to my dismay, just what a lunatic Tim O’Riordan really was. When he realized how determined I was to get out of here, he jumped straight out of our vehicle and ran down the road toward the border. By the time our vehicle caught up with O’Riordan, he was half way to the border camps. Our verbal exchange was tense and terse.

“Get in the truck, O’Riordan. We have to get out of here.” I was pissed now.

“Absolutely not! You can turn around. I’ll find my way back myself.”

Had I known Tim O’Riordan then like I know him now, this response would not have surprised me. In subsequent years he would be found cavorting with Afghan warlords during the Taliban occupation of Afghanistan; chasing down Ebola cases during a civil war in the Congo; contracting the Chikungunya virus in Senegal; and doing research on meningococcal meningitis as South Sudan devolved into internecine chaos. He was addicted to perilous situations. There was no way he was turning back now.

I had two choices: I could accompany O’Riordan into the border camps and make sure he got back safely, or I could get the hell out of there. I’m no hero. I thought it over for a few nanoseconds and said, “You’re a crazy man, O’Riordan. You can get yourself killed. I’m getting out of here.” I motioned to the driver to turn the car around and skedaddle.

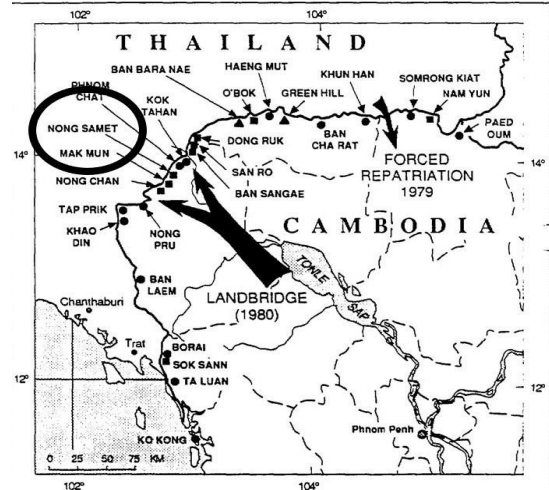
But the driver refused to budge. “Khun Somchai told me to make sure you both returned safely. He knew it would be dangerous out here. He said that having an incident with two Americans at the border would be trouble for everyone. I can’t leave unless he comes too.”

I was aghast. Once again I found myself in a hazardous predicament for which I was physiologically and emotionally unprepared. As the driver drove forward to catch up to O’Riordan, I shivered with fear, my bowels rumbled, and I most probably had skid marks on my underwear.

“Get in the truck, you fool,” I screamed at O’Riordan as we caught up to him. “We’ll see what’s going on in the border camp. Then we are out of here.” This was good enough for O’Riordan. He jumped in the vehicle.



The border camp we approached, Nong Samet (pronounced Nawng Sa-met), was controlled by the Khmer Serei or Free Khmer. The Khmer Serei was an anti-communist and anti-monarchist guerrilla force opposed to the Cambodian leader King Norodom Sihanouk. They had been subdued and systematically purged by the Khmer Rouge. When the Khmer Rouge was overthrown by the Vietnamese in 1979, the remnants of the Khmer Serei had been reduced to petty warlords and bandits who became a source of disruption along the Thai-Cambodian border. They controlled the Nong Samet Camp and we were headed right into it.



**Cambodian Refugee encampments on the Thai/Cambodian Border 1982**

Nong Samet was huge. There were 80,000 Cambodian refugees in the camp. Unlike the refugee camps in Thailand, this place did not receive any food, water, shelter, sanitation, or clothing from the UN and international refugee relief agencies. Its inhabitants were sandwiched between the Vietnamese and Thai armies, and could neither enter Thailand nor return to Cambodia. They were held hostage by the Khmer Serei.

Nong Samet was also a mess. It made Khao-I-Dang look like a holiday resort. The shelters, if you could call them that, were made of bamboo, tree branches, and twigs. Their thatched roofs were crumbling. The people were listless, haggard, dirty, malnourished, and they looked miserable. There were young men, and a few women, brandishing Kalashnikov rifles and swaggering through the camps with long hair, bandannas, and straw hats. These were the Khmer Serei guerilla fighters. Their bravado was likely amplified by the Thai sticks and amphetamines abundantly available at the border. The place spooked me. It thrilled O’Riordan. He couldn’t wait to explore further. I couldn’t wait to get out of there.

As we proceeded cautiously, we came upon a bamboo hut where a group of ostensibly Khmer



**Khmer Serei guerilla fighters in Nong Samet**

Serei fighters were hunched over a table examining a map. The huts were so decrepit we could see right inside; and they could see out. It looked like they were planning a foray on one of the neighboring camps, or a raid on the Vietnamese Army. Suddenly, they noticed us. It was hard to miss us, two tall, white, honky Americans in a white pickup truck. They began yelling at us. Then they grabbed their guns and chased after us.

This was my worst nightmare, finding myself in a no man’s land where there were no rules, no laws, no authority, and no place to run; and now a group of drug-crazed guerilla fighters

were chasing us with guns. Nice planning Cashman...or should I say... O'Riordan! The driver, observing what was taking place before his very eyes, immediately spun the car around, but our egress was already blocked by the Khmer Serei guerillas with their Kalashnikovs pointed at us. They motioned for us to get out of the truck. Then they screamed at us in Cambodian. O'Riordan appeared quite composed but was clearly not taking any initiative. He could speak neither Thai nor Cambodian and would be useless as an interlocutor. The driver was cowering in the back (damn his eyes). Where was that bluster about making sure that the two *farangs* would return safely to Bangkok. The only thing he wanted to save now was his own ass. This left Yours Truly as the one who would have to discuss matters, obviously of grave importance, with these ruffians, and I was scared shitless, which was somehow ironic seeing that it was our efforts to "collect shit" that got us into our present dilemma. O'Riordan gently nudged me forward, with the proverbial "shit eating grin on his face," to speak to the local representatives of the Khmer Serei.

"Please excuse the intrusion. We were just in Khao-I-Dang refugee camp and they told us we could find a small, but inexpensive, guest house around here with delicious local food," I uttered in my fluent Thai. "I heard that frogs, roasted over a tiny brassier, is in season; and with a little lemon, garlic and chili sauce, it's better than sex." It was the first thing that came into my mind. I was so scared, I just blurted it out.

When I saw that my attempt at levity was not going well, I changed course. "Or did we perhaps take the wrong turn back there. If so, we'll simply turn around and leave. I sincerely hope we haven't interrupted anything important that you were doing." In hindsight this was a pretty lame response, but I had already learned throughout my less than stellar career that when the chips are down, simply plead ignorance and run if you can. This ploy had successfully worked for me endless times in the past.

Unfortunately, it didn't work this time. A particularly repulsive brute stepped forward and confronted me in Thai. "You're Americans. You're spies. Who sent you here and what do you want to learn?"

It certainly wasn't about the Khmer Serei's reported hospitality or their reputed tasty cuisine. I now attempted a different approach, one that might be a bit more convincing.

"Actually, we're journalists. We heard that the conditions in Nong Samet were bad. We want to write a story that will explain your plight to the world, and maybe attract some sympathy as well as financial resources from donor countries."

This rejoinder seemed to piss him off even more. "That's bullshit. We hear such nonsense all the time. You're spies." He motioned to his underlings. "Take them away. We'll deal with them later." And thus the shit collectors from Bangkok presently found themselves being hustled off to another ramshackle hut with an armed guard posted at the door.

Once inside, I confronted O'Riordan, "Well genius, you had to go to the camps to get your kicks, and look at the trouble we're in now. But don't worry, our present situation will probably get a helluva lot worse!!!"

O'Riordan shrugged his shoulders before inquiring nonchalantly, "Oh, by the way, do you have any idea what I should do with this opium that I have in my pocket?" As I gasped for air and my jaw

dropped, O'Riordan pulled a large wad of black opium tar wrapped in cellophane from his pocket. "I was smoking some last night and didn't have time to ditch it."

I couldn't believe what was unfolding before my very eyes. First he drags me into this god-forsaken camp. Now he informs me that he happens to have, on his possession, some opium that needs to be jettisoned before our Khmer Serei friends return for further interrogations. If I could have gotten my hands on one of those Kalashnikovs, I would have finished him off right then and there.

That would have to wait until the Khmer Serei guerillas were finished with us, as four of them now entered our hut to interrogate us further about our intentions in visiting Nong Samet. While I fielded their questions, I noticed O'Riordan making eyes at one of the fighters. She happened to be a female, and believe it or not, O'Riordan was openly flirting with her. He was a notorious ladies' man, of that there was no doubt, but there are probably better places to slake one's carnal appetite than in a jail cell being held hostage on the Thai-Cambodian border.

"Were you flirting with that woman?" I asked incredulously when they left. "Do you realize the gravity of our predicament? We're in big trouble and you're flirting with one of our captors?" Here I was paralyzed with fear, and O'Riordan was trying to get laid.

O'Riordan merely smiled as he leaned against a dirty pillow and claimed smugly, "Oh, by the way I just happen to know that woman. She is one of the regulars at the Thermae Massage Parlor. I see her there most every night. In case you are interested, we happen to be good buddies. I had no idea she moonlighted as a Khmer Serei guerilla. She does very well at the Thermae, and believe me I should know! The Khmer Serei must pay their fighters really well."



**Ramshackle huts in Nong Samet**

I was flabbergasted when I heard this retort, but I also saw a resolution to our dilemma. O'Riordan's flair with the ladies was not to be underestimated. With his amorous skills, she might be our ticket out of Nong Samet.

"Did you get her attention? Do you think she'll return to see you?"

"She'll be back for sure. I told you we're good buddies." I wasn't sure how she could help us, but I knew it was our only chance.

Sure enough, about two hours later, O'Riordan's lady friend was back, loitering clandestinely around our hut. It appeared she could no longer resist O'Riordan's magnetism and came right up to the hut to speak with him through the bamboo-slat walls. She was a bold one. Soon the guard approached her, but she gave him such a tongue-lashing in Khmer that he slithered back to his post. She obviously had some influence in Nong Samet.

She spoke broken English, enough for O'Riordan to communicate with her. It was clear she was enamored with him. When he showed her the opium, she nearly came in her pants too. This was an

opportunity for some Cashman mendacity. I pulled O’Riordan aside to provide some suggestions of how we might eventually save our respective derrieres and even live to tell this amusing tale at a future point in time. Accordingly, I recommended that O’Riordan say something to the effect that, "You had heard from the girls at the Thermae that she was in Nong Samet, and that you’re madly in love with her and risked a trip to the border just to find her. Give her some of your opium and say that if she manages to get us out of here, you’ll meet her in Bangkok and there will be more opium where that came from. Then top it off with a promise to take her to Hawaii." I threw the last part in as a sweetener as everybody, even if they live or work in a refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodia border, wants to go to Hawaii.

Lying didn’t come as easily to O’Riordan as it did to me, but on the other hand when it came to flattering the ladies, O’Riordan was a master par excellence. O’Riordan's female admirer was on board in five minutes, but we simply couldn’t break out of our incarceration since they had impounded our vehicle. As she took the wad of opium from O’Riordan, she demurely smiled at him, making it clear that she had a better idea.

Within several hours a senior coterie of Khmer Serei fighters, including O’Riordan’s female friend, had returned and entered our hut. The ambiance was now a great deal more hospitable than during our earlier tete-a-tete. They had tried the opium and were eager to obtain more. O’Riordan’s lady friend had also assured them that we weren’t spies but instead were just some losers who had stumbled into their camp by accident. As such we had no usefulness to them, and probably would not even earn them enough money to buy several plates of fried rice if they tried to ransom us off to the international diplomatic community.

But if they could somehow acquire more of O’Riordan’s opium, they were willing to become our bosom buddies. In brief, we agreed that O’Riordan would meet our new friends at the Thermae Massage Parlor in one week. O’Riordan would bring the opium, the Khmer Serei would bring the object of O’Riordan’s affection; the swap would be made, and everyone would be happy. The fact that O’Riordan was planning to be on an airplane heading back to Hawaii in five days was not mentioned during our lively and amicable discussion. The next day O’Riordan and I climbed into our white pickup truck and drove back to Bangkok.

It goes without saying that I was still extremely pissed at O’Riordan when we reached Bangkok. The entire incident revealed that he was impudent, reckless, and lacked judgment. He also had chutzpah and a huge set of balls. But, then again, he knew infectious diseases and he loved Thailand. He also loved Thai women. They would help him to learn the language. Hiring him as my replacement at API was risky, but Somchai took a risk when he hired me. We all agreed – Tim O’Riordan would be the next incarnation of Larry Cashman, at least the one that used to work for API.

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The coup d’état, engineered by the Thai Army of the East on the day we departed for our Nong Samet adventure, successfully removed the sitting Prime Minister, Kriangsak Chomanand, from office, but it failed to get the support of the King of Thailand. He fled to Korat, a city in the Northeast, where the Thai Army of the Northeast took him under their protection. Thus, while O’Riordan and I were being held by the Khmer Serei, the Army of the Northeast was descending on Bangkok to confront the Army of the

East. It looked like there would be an all-out battle on the streets of Bangkok, but then the Army of the East decided to lay down their arms and present their rivals with flowers instead of a cannon fusillade. The Thais are lovers, not fighters.

I never found out what actually happened at the Thermae Massage Parlor where the Khmer Serei was supposed to meet O’Riordan. No way was I going near that place. What I did learn, however, was that the Thermae Massage Parlor had predominantly Cambodian women working in its establishment. They would move back and forth from Cambodia, freelancing as massage workers and Khmer Serei guerillas, as their mood dictated.

And thanks to another dose of uncanny good luck and, of course, Dr. P’s intervention, I got the job at the US Embassy in Jakarta. But first I had to negotiate my contract with an alcoholic US Embassy contract officer, and then move my family and all our belongings to Indonesia. It turned out that my trip to Nong Samet was a prequel to the many trials and tribulations that would eventually emerge on the road to Indonesia.