



# PHRAE FREE THAI: COMMUNITY BASED MUSEUM

By Puchong Kanthatham

## Introduction to the Museum

The Phrae Free Thai community based museum, established in August 2007, is a learning center which provides the history of the Free Thai resistance forces that conducted a secret war against the Japanese army occupation of Thailand during World War II (1941-1944).

The museum is divided into 4 main sections:

1. The formation of the Free Thai Movement
2. The operation of the Phrae Free Thai
3. The formation of the Free Thai Movement in the US and UK
4. The end of WW II and Thailand's Independence

Each section provides story boards with names and pictures of Free Thai members and their roles in the secret operation.

The Phrae Free Thai museum (PFT) is located in the same compound as the Paradorn Hotel in Phrae Province, serving approximately 500,000 people in the province as well as other Thai visitors arriving from different parts of the country and,

occasionally, others from foreign countries. The museum benefits from being in the same compound with the Paradorn Hotel, attracting a number of hotel guests daily. The main group of visitors, however, has been students of all ages ranging from kindergarten to university students from Phrae and other provinces. On any given day there could be as many as a hundred students arriving at the museum.

The Free Thai secret movement was remarkable in scope and magnitude in leading Thailand back to the status of a free nation, but Thai people in general have never had an opportunity to fully appreciate this important chapter of Thai history. Realizing this loss of opportunity, we have organized the PFT museum which may be the only museum in Thailand with a permanent exhibition of Free Thai history.

The PFT museum is privately financed and operated by Mr. Puchong Kanthatham, son of Rep. Thong Kanthatham who was the leader of the Phrae Free Thai Operation to resist the Japanese army operation in the North of Thailand.





Admission is free and there are 5 volunteers taking turns to provide information to visitors on a daily basis. Group visitors are usually requested to make an appointment. Free Thai shirts and other gift items are for sale at the museum and at the Paradorn hotel. Visitors coming from near and far have been diverse: students, workers, government officials, soldiers, police officers, foreign visitors, and business people, amongst others.

The PFT museum is set in the wooden house which Rep. Thong Kanthatham started to build before WW II and actually finished it after the war. Within the museum, important events of the Free Thai are described in short summary form on large story boards throughout the museum. And in addition to story boards and pictures of Free Thai members, visitors will find WW II objects including samurai swords and replicas of atomic bombs.

Some of these items were donated to the museum by people who appreciated the museum and understood the value and the

importance of the Free Thai's role in WW II history. The museum has recently added the statue of Rep. Thong standing in front of the museum house, and it has become a main attraction for picture-taking of PFT visitors.

The writings on the story boards create an atmosphere within the museum which effectively invokes the sense of nationalism among Thais, which had formerly been the basis for the formation of the resistance movement during WW II. The museum intends to instill in the minds of the public how their brave Thai ancestors fought with determination and with a great sense of sacrifice to preserve the identity, cultural value, and independence of their country during WW II.

By using the Free Thai movement as an example, PFT hopes to stimulate the sense of non-aggressive and productive nationalism amongst Thai people and to work positively, in unity, for long-term stability and the continuing growth of the community and the country.

## Historic origins: Formation of the Free Thai

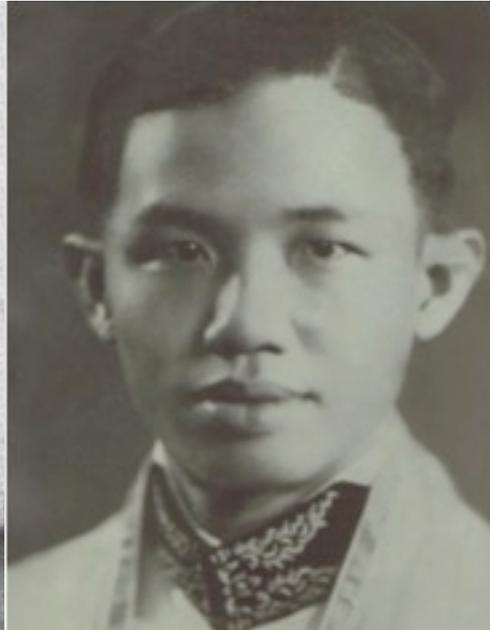
In 1941 Thailand, the only Southeast Asian country not colonized by a European power, was apprehensive and concerned about the WWII situation as neighboring countries became involved with their European masters in the war. Then, on December 8, 1941, the Japanese 5th Division invaded Thailand by landing at the cities of Pattani and Songkhla and on the island of Ko Samui-- all in the Southern part of the country. The Guards Division, 25th Army landed small elements at Samut

A Thai cabinet meeting finally concluded that Thailand should surrender to the Japanese demands rather than fight a hopeless and costly battle. An agreement was reached between Japan and Thailand on December 9, 1941. Initially Japan called for the two countries to sign a mutual defense pact allowing Japanese forces throughout Thailand without asking for commitment to the Axis or to support the full scale Japanese war effort in Southeast Asia. Later, however, on December 21 following continuing political and military pressure, Thailand and Japan signed a "Treaty of Alliance". And Thailand finally was forced to declare war on the United States and England on January 25, 1942.



Prakhan, South of Bangkok. Another group of the Guards Division entered the country overland from Cambodia at the town of Aranyaprathet. Thai forces fought with courage to resist the invaders. At the same time with the surprise landings, hundreds of Japanese agents surfaced in uniform throughout the country to guide the advancing forces.

The reality of the occupation by Japanese forces caused Thai people to feel that their country had lost its sovereignty and independence. The Thais love their country. They are aware that it has been the 'Land of the Thai' for many centuries, and they are proud that only rarely and briefly has it been under foreign rule. They have a very fully developed sense of nationality, an amalgam of ideas of sharing a common land, a common language, and a common religion—all under one king. While fully developed, this nationalism is not aggressive or exclusive. It is the quiet and confident attitude of a people who value their way of life but who have no wish to impose it on others (Blanchard 1958:13).



The situation had stimulated the Thai people's nationalism and the sense of independence which fostered resistance movements simultaneously within Thailand, UK, and the US. It was secretly known that organized resistance forces began even before the accord of December 9 was signed.

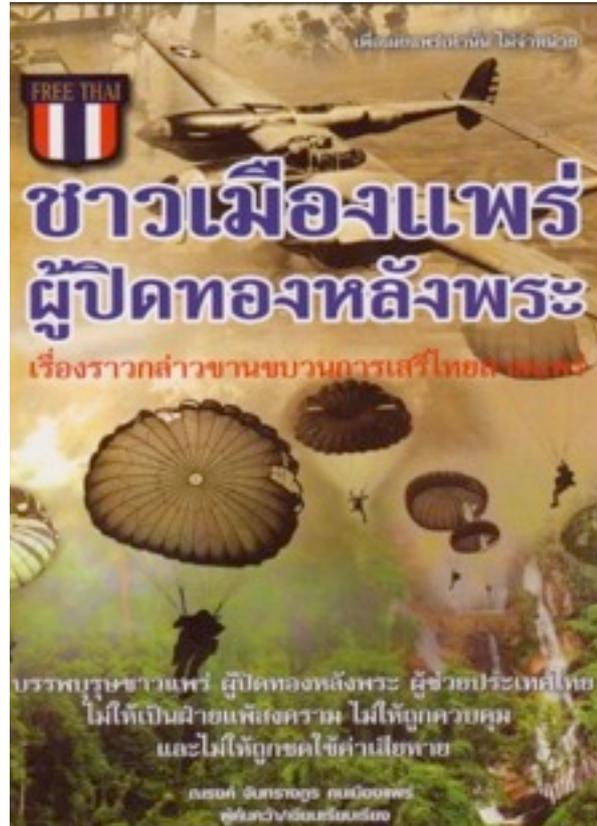
“On that infamous December 8, 1941, while the average citizen of Thailand stood dazed and weeping in the streets watching Japanese trucks roll by.....on that very day the first attempt to organize systematic resistance was made” (London1944: 389 )  
The museum's section one has been able to portray the remarkable sense of strong commitment and determination of the Thai resistance group and their effort to

communicate and coordinate a worldwide resistance effort; an effort all the more remarkable considering the fact that the original group which formed Free Thai comprised of civilians without prior military training or background. The people who became Free Thai leaders were Dr. Pridi Banomyong, Thawee Bunyaket, Rep. Thong Kanthatham, Sagan Tularaksa, Rep. Tieng Sirikhanth, Rep. Pueng Srichan, Thawil Udol, Jungat Palangkul, and Direck Jayanam; later known as the X.O. group. These were the bold, the brave, and the brightest men who truly loved their country---willing to sacrifice everything to restore its independence and integrity. At that time, Pridi Banomyong had a large following in Thailand and was thus the automatic choice to lead the resistance group from the start.

## Free Thai in Phrae

After December 1941, the Japanese forces in Thailand were overwhelming in number and occupying strategic areas in Thailand. It was necessary for Free Thai to expand to cover areas where operations to resist and to disrupt the Japanese troop movements would be possible and effective.

Pridi Banomyong kept recruiting key members from people of all walks of life and all of them were his most trusted friends and associates. The expansion of the movement was slow but steady. Subsequently Rep. Thong Kanthatham was assigned by Pridi to organize the Free Thai operation in Phrae province where Rep. Thong had a large number of followers. His meetings with close associates and relatives went smoothly and in top secret. They decided to use Ban Nong Muang Khai as the first



location for the Free Thai operation in Phrae.

Key members for the Phrae operation in addition to Rep. Thong were Khoon Muang Kai Kachorn, Thaweesak Sinthuwong, Auan Luewathananon, and Chow Wong Saensiriphan. These leaders began to recruit more members which would grow to reach 500 men. They later moved the operation to Pae Pieng located about 14 Kms from Ban Nong Muang Khai to avoid being detected by the Japanese soldiers. Most of the recruits were villagers and teachers who had not been told about the operation until they reached a hideout called Pae Pieng where Rep. Thong (Code "Tony") would begin to reveal the secrets in an emotional speech:

"My friends, we are here today to devote our lives for our beloved country in time of need just like those who have saved our country from the invading enemies in the past .This is a risky



operation aimed to free our country from the Japanese army. If you agree to join us, your name will be remembered as heroes of this country. If you do not wish to fight with us for whatever reasons, you are free to turn around and leave. But remember. This is a top secret operation. You are requested to keep this secret as you leave this place.”

(Speech noted by Niwat Suwannagart : Free Thai)

After each meeting none of the recruits turned back; all of them decided to join the operation. The sentiment at that time was to fight for their country even if

it might cost their lives. When the Free Thai operation center in Bangkok was finally able to reach further understanding with Free Thai USA led by M.L. Seni Pramoj, the US began to send three OSS officers and Thai volunteers along with supplies by parachutes to join the Phrae operation which was named “Operation Numeral”. After thorough trainings, some Free Thai members would spread out to key areas in Phrae and Lampang, and in Wieng Tah where Free Thai members were able to intercept 2 Japanese soldiers who were on a mission to locate a Free Thai training camp.

## Free Thai and the Allied War Effort

As mentioned, Thais who decided to fight for their country during the Japanese invasion were living as far away as the US and Britain. When the Thai Government at the time instructed the Thai Ambassador in London to deliver the declaration of war to the British government, M.L. Seni Pramoj, the Thai Ambassador to Washington refused to act according to the instruction. Instead, he began to organize the resistance movement in the United States. Seni proceeded to mobilize Thai volunteers in support of the Allies. Most of Thai US residents were university students who joined in to fight for their country. A similar resistance movement was formed by Thais in Britain, and the natural leaders

of the British Thai community were three high ranking members of the Royal family: Prince Chula Chakrabongse, Queen Ramphaiphanni, and Prince S. Sawatdiwat.

Two leaders of pro-Allied students, Snoh Tambuyen and Puey Ungphakorn expressed their desire to participate in the Allied war effort. In all thirty-five students passed the physical test and were accepted in the Pioneer Corps, a military labor unit.

Thai agents from abroad would begin to infiltrate by going through South China and Laos into Northern Thailand and from India starting February 19, 1944. They were under mission to organize an infiltration route through Central Thailand



## Post-war Negotiations with the US and UK

After WW II ended, Thailand still had to face the formidable task of dealing with the Allied partners, most notably the British, who were determined to punish Thailand. The British set up twenty-one conditions which would later increase to fifty-one, seeking heavy compensations and interference in the internal affairs of Thailand. However, Free Thai was widely recognized as the movement that had maintained Thailand's freedom and had demonstrated unwillingness to be a partner to Japanese Imperialism. This had left a good impression on many people in the US.

This triggered a letter-writing campaign, involving hundreds of letters, conducted by Mrs. Betty McKenzie, a staff at the US State Department, which would reach President Truman and the Vice President, Cabinet members, Senators

and Congressmen, newspaper publishers and journalists, and friends –insisting that the Americans set forth their basic principles of freedom and that the British live up to their commitments of territorial aggrandizement and show respect for human rights.

Finally on January 5, diplomatic relations between Thailand (Siam) and Great Britain and between Thailand and the United States were resumed. And subsequently with the support of the US, the Free Thai negotiation team was able to reduce nearly all of the demands and enable the country to regain independence status---only after many months of hard negotiations. It could be said that the free and independent state status was achieved by the Free Thai who were unified, devoted, and dedicated to the desire to keep Thailand free.



## Impact and Activities



The Free Thai movement was a noble act of courage which portrayed the most extensive and unified political organization ever accomplished by the Thai people to achieve a common purpose. The movement included royalists, princes, commoners, bureaucrats, politicians, students, and peasants. These people abandoned their differences and worked together for a common cause stretching from the US, UK, Ceylon, China, and many provinces of Thailand to resist successfully in removing foreign troops from their land.

Both Pridi Banomyong and M.R. Seni Prmoj organized the resistance movement as a means toward achieving post-war political goals which would lead to retaining Thailand's independence. This standard of unity has not been matched since the post war era which has been marked by monotonous feuding, political fragmentations, and military coups.

Presently, however, the community and the general public have benefited to some significant degree from PFT Museum. Thai visitors to the museum in particular have been strongly impressed and appreciate the heroic actions and the secret operation which finally succeeded in the ultimate objectives. And the comments after visiting the museum have been very positive. Many visitors felt the need for Thai people to take interest and to contribute more to their country. Through interviews, over 90 % of visitors to the museum had scant knowledge of the Free Thai Movement and how they had contributed to the independence of this country.

Now with the new learning opportunity at the PFT Museum, many schools in Phrae have moved quickly to benefit from Free Thai history. They have organized student groups of all ages to visit the museum. Phrae students and residents are particularly proud of Phrae Free Thai



and their significant contributions in the secret war against the Japanese troops. As a result, the Phrae Free Thai Museum has become a popular learning center and a tourist attraction for the province.

In addition to bringing out Free Thai history in the form of an open display, the museum shines a spotlight on outstanding Thai leaders who could become great role models for people of this modern society. The FTP museum has also ventured out to conduct outside exhibitions and to provide lectures in Phrae, Payow, Nan province, and by participating in seminar events at Free Thai Park and at the Pridi Banomyong Institute in Bangkok.

Now information on Phrae Free Thai could also be found on internet. We have also cooperated in presenting the museum in a well known national TV program "Tiew Lamai Thailand" and have participated on local radio station SOR VOR TOR Phrae on many occasions to further publicize Free Thai movement in WW II.

Two books on the Free Thai operation have been published with the emphasis on the Phrae operation: "Rak Chart Ying Cheep" and "Chow Muang Phare" and are for sale and for distribution to school students.

Presently, the Free Thai movement which had been almost unknown to most people, especially the young people, is now much better known to the public.

In the mean time, schools in Phrae have done much more than only organizing students to visit the museum and to



prepare reports for class credits. Teachers are now including the history of the Phrae Free Thai secret movement in their school lessons. They have adopted Phrae Free Thai in school plays, narration competitions, school projects competitions--- all receiving top prizes at regional and at national level.

Students at Wat May Thang School won a Gold Medal at the regional level for using Phrae Free Thai in the school play competition of 2010 in Chiang Rai. Students at Patana Pracha Uphatum School won second prize on narration of Phrae Free Thai at the 2010 national level competition in Bangkok. Muang Khai Wittayakhom School, Nong Muang Khai, Phrae won " Best Of The Best Practices " award in Lab school Symposium 2011, for introducing Free Thai movement in History classes at the school. And after several visits to the Phrae Free Thai museum they have organized a permanent museum of Nong Muang Khai Free Thai in the school compound.

The Phrae Free Thai museum is now widely accepted as a history learning center for Phrae province. Most importantly, the history of Free Thai serves as a fine example for Thai people on how to be accountable and to contribute to their country.

## Future plans



1. The PFT museum is planning to reach out to schools in 8 different district locations in Phrae to introduce the Free Thai resistance movement in their school cultural heritage preservation projects.
2. We will continue to contact schools in nearby provinces by sending information on Free Thai and invitations to teachers and students to visit the PFT museum.
3. The PFT museum will continue to participate in outside exhibitions whenever possible.
4. The PFT museum will encourage the establishment of Free Thai museums

in other provinces to be used as learning center using the PFT museum as a model. In fact, some progress in on this has been made with people in Sakol Nakorn.

One important basic requirement for people living in a democratic society is to participate in beneficial activities and to jointly contribute to the common causes of their country. Our main objective is to promote public awareness of national affairs and to accept the responsibility in contributing positively to the long term development, the stability, and the preservation of the cultural value.

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Phitak Suwannagart (Free Thai)

## About The Author

Puchong Kanthatham is the eldest son of Rep. Thong Kanthatham and the founder/  
owner of Phrae Free Thai museum.