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The Spies Who Came In From Sakhon Nakhon

WXPPost

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SAKHON NAKHON, Thailand, April 6—What was a master spy novelist like John Le Carre, author of "The Spy Who Came in From the Cold" and "A Small Town in Germany" doing here in a small dusty town in northeast Thailand?

The average tourist in Thailand settles for Bangkok's floating market or maybe a day trip to the Bridge on the River Kwai. But John Le Carre was observed here inspecting a nondescript and deserted house, across the street from a gas station, with empty holes where the air conditioners used to be. Baleful water buffaloes watched him as he circled around the house taking

notes and an occasional photograph.

Until a few months ago the house was the CIA headquarters in Sakhon Nakhon, 350 miles northeast of Bangkok. But in December the CIA's cover was "blown" in one of the more bizarre and embarrassing incidents in the history of espionage. A visit to the CIA house in Sakhon Nakhon, for spy fans, may rank one day with a trip to the Berlin Wall or a ride on the Orient Express.

Northeast Thailand is the scene of a sputtering Communist rebellion, and last December Thailand's premier and several newspa-

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pers received a letter purporting to be from a Communist rebel chief. The letter offered to negotiate with Thailand's new civilian government which came to power following student riots last October. But the letter had been sent by registered mail and the return address given the post office was none other than the CIA headquarters in Sakhon Nakhon. It seems that a CIA agent had given the letter to a Thai office boy to mail and, in an excess of zeal, the office boy had registered the letter. Thus was the offer to negotiate revealed to be a CIA forgery.

The Thai government was furious, students howled, protested and burned the American flag. The U.S. embassy owned up to the whole affair and said that "it was a regrettable and unauthorized initiative."

The new American ambassador, William Kintner, said that the local agent in Sakhon Nakhon had acted on his own initiative without anyone's authority in a "gung-ho" spirit. Kintner apologized to the government and the king and announced that the offending agent had been sent home

and the Sakhon Nakhon office closed.

The number of persons in Thailand who believed the U.S. embassy's version of what happened could all quite comfortably sit on the back of one very small water buffalo.

But no one could say what really did happen. Sources here say that there were two CIA agents—both in their 30s "They never said what they actually did," one source said. "When you asked them they would say, 'Oh, a little of this and a little of that,' and we all figured they were into drug suppression."

According to our informant, the agents were seen on New Year's Eve and they asked some of their friends around for a drink the following afternoon. When the guests arrived the next day the agents were gone and were not seen again.

"It's called 'leaving in your socks' in the espionage business," Le Carre said, writing it all down. The CIA office stood locked and deserted for a while and in early January the news of the agents' departure broke in the Bangkok press. Finally, the Thai landlord asked the local Americans to come and take away their strange machines, according

to our source, but none of the Americans left in town had any responsibility for the equipment and no one knew what to do. Our source thought the machines had something to do with codes and radios. At last, some Americans arrived to reclaim the equipment.

Some Thai youths broke in to steal the air conditioners, and today the house stands forlorn and empty.

Le Carre said that if he were writing a spy story about the whole affair he could not possibly have the agent write such a letter on his own without authority from his bosses in Bangkok. That would be too unbelievable.

More likely the letter had been written in Bangkok and sent to the agent for mailing so that it would have a northeastern postmark.

What about the mail boy registering the letter? we asked. Is it possible that a first-rate intelligence service like the CIA would make a stupid mistake like that?

"Oh yes, quite possible," Le Carre said with some delight. "It happens all the time. When in-doubt about something like this assume a screw-up."

If he were to write a novel about the spies who

came in from Sakhon Nakhon, Le Carre said he might assume two possible scenarios. If the operation were in the "clean tricks department," Le Carre said, the motive might have been to "put two imponderable forces into collision to see how both would react." There was Thailand with a new civilian government. A fake letter from the insurgents might bring a genuine response.

"I would also assume that the CIA had the means to observe the effect of this collision on the rebels, that the CIA was engaged here in reinfiltrating defectors back into the insurgent ranks."

If the CIA had burned a defector into their trousers, which is spy talk for blackmailing somebody into becoming a double agent, perhaps they had someone high up in the rebel ranks?

"If it were a clean trick it might have been a genuine effort to bring about conciliation," Le Carre said. If, on the other hand, it were a "dirty trick" the motive might have been to prevent negotiations by "interposing the CIA as a bogey between the two parties."

One can always tell a CIA house in northeast Thailand because, no matter how innocent-looking they are, they bristle with air conditioners. They often have big electric transformers outside as well—something to do with the radios and the code machines?

Of course, Le Carre did not claim to have any real knowledge of what happened here. He was merely looking at the plot with a novelist's eye.

"Suppose that somewhere in the world of signals they had broken down a code used by the rebels, or part of the code and they needed the rebels to broadcast a text which would give them the indicators..."

Le Carre was writing in his notebook when we headed out of town to Nakhon Phanom on the border with Laos, where there is a bigger and better CIA house still in operation.