

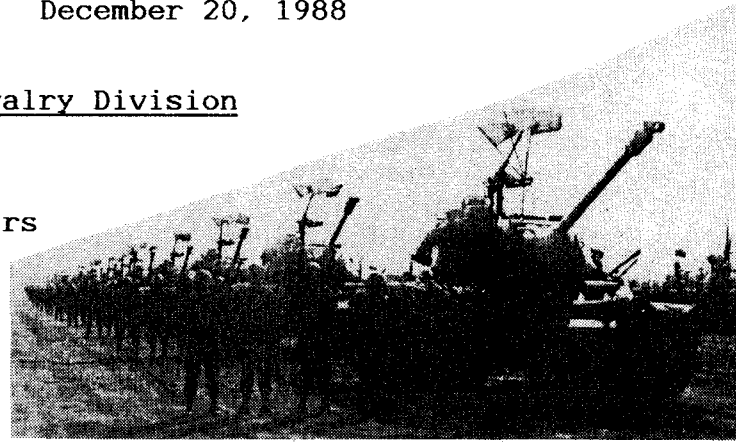
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The Shape of Things to Come:
The Royal Thai Army's Second Cavalry Division

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Dear Peter,

Peering through his binoculars, the veteran Thai cavalry officer scanned the opposing columns of armor that stretched across the dusty plain toward the Dong Phaya Yen mountains in the east. Over 100 Eastern-bloc armored personnel carriers formed the left flank. At right and center, new, Soviet-designed T69-II tanks were interspersed among an odd mix of older American tanks. Engines idling, some 5,000 tons of armor waited for the snap of the green signal flag to rumble forward.

An invasion from the east by a socialist enemy? Not exactly. This was more of a friendly infiltration by China North Industries Corporation.

Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan, a retired cavalry commander, led over 500 Thai military officers and foreign dignitaries in reviewing the pride of the Royal Thai Army--the 2nd Cavalry Division. Elements from the division put on an impressive display of 303 vehicles: numerous American-made M-48A5 and M-41 tanks, scores of Soviet-designed T69-II tanks and M-85 armored personnel carriers produced by China North Industries Corp., a few British "Scorpion" reconnaissance vehicles, and a small assortment of artillery. The November 29 show at the Saraburi Cavalry Center, 100 kilometers northeast of Bangkok, was a well-choreographed "demonstration of combat readiness" in which the armor filed past a grandstand crammed with dignitaries.

Two years ago, armor at the Cavalry Center would have been almost exclusively of American and European origin. But this time, North China Industries Corp, supplied about half of the equipment on display. Spurred in part by a decline in U.S. military aid, the Royal Thai Army (RTA) has increasingly

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purchased inexpensive, Chinese-built armor to sustain its modernization drive. As one of the foreign spectators said prior to the show: "Is it any wonder that when U.S. aid was cut in 1986, China stepped into the breach?" For the 2nd Cavalry Division, the vanguard of the move to Chinese hardware, T69-II tanks form one of its three tank battalions while several hundred M-85 armored personnel carriers (APCs) fill out the divisions entire fleet of APCs.

This newsletter updates a previous one (ERG-11) on the role of Chinese armor in supporting the RTA's modernization program. The following is based on attendance at the media extravaganza at the Saraburi Cavalry Center; a later interview with the commander of the 2nd Cavalry Division; and a separate, individual visit to the Cavalry Center, the first such visit permitted for a reporter.

Addressing the cavalry, Gen. Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, Commander in Chief of the RTA, said he was "very proud and impressed" by their "demonstration of combat readiness." Gen. Chavalit singled out the 2nd Cavalry Division as the first unit to reach full strength under his plan. He announced that the Army was "ready to meet any border eventuality" now that the 1st Cavalry Division had also been brought up to full strength and four infantry divisions had been reorganized to become mechanized infantry divisions.

With the reorganization of the Army completed, the next step, fully mechanizing four infantry divisions, will require the rapid delivery of armor. Each division will need several hundred APCs and may have attached to it a tank battalion of about 25 to 50 machines. To date, Thailand has received 30 T69-II tanks and 419 M-85 APCs from China with another order for 23 tanks and 360 APCs not yet delivered. When delivered next year, these T69-IIs will bring the 2nd Cavalry Division's battalion of Chinese tanks up to full strength at 51 machines. It is reported that when Gen. Chavalit visited China in late November he signed an agreement for 30 more tanks and 800 APCs. In addition, delivery of 106 "Stingray" light tanks, manufactured by Cadillac Gage, will begin in 90 days and will be completed by the end of 1989. Finally, a shipment of 40 rebuilt U.S. M-48A5s, originally ordered prior to 1984, is expected to begin arriving in 1989. Adding these numbers to Thailand's existing fleet of 65 M-48A5s and 200 ageing U.S. M-41s, a foreign military official noted wryly: "Pretty soon the RTA is going to have 400 tanks. I don't know what they are going to do with all those tanks."

Because Thailand boasts both U.S. and Soviet-designed armor, Bangkok's military aficionados play the game of comparing hardware. On paper, the M-48A5, currently the mainstay of the Thai cavalry, and the T69-II come out about even in range, speed, and firepower. But Chinese hardware suffers from a poor image. A sales representative from Cadillac Gage, manufacturer of the M-48, predicted that for the T69-IIs, "If you come back here in five years, you are going to see a lot of scrap metal." In contrast, a U.S. military official described the T69-II as "a good tank." Senior Thai officials have publicly rated the two tanks as equal. Thus when the commander of the 2nd Cavalry Division, Maj. Gen. Tossaporn Songsuwan,

was cornered by reporters during the show, he carefully skirted any direct comparisons: "We've used American equipment for a long time now and the Chinese equipment has just arrived, so I can't say which is better." But, he noted with a smile that some of his men prefer driving the M-48A5 because of its automatic transmission.

Comparisons of firepower can make for troubles. The M-48A5 is equipped with a rifled 105mm gun, while the T69-II comes with a smooth-bore 100mm gun of Eastern European origin. A previous newsletter claimed incorrectly that future shipments of Chinese T69-IIs would be fitted with an Israeli 105mm gun of U.S. design probably in violation of the U.S. arms control export act. Indeed, the U.S. Embassy sent a cable to Washington noting that Israel appeared to be violating the law. But it is now believed that future deliveries of T69-IIs are likely to be fitted with a 105mm gun of British design. Contrary to reports in the international press that Thailand's present T69-IIs have already been refitted with 105mm guns, Gen. Tossaporn, various cavalry officers, and other sources said that this is not the case.

According to Gen. Tossaporn, the M-48A5 and T69-II have about the same effective range (2,400 yards) and accuracy when stationary. But other cavalry officers said that when the M-48A5 is on the move, its "hits go down" because it lacks a stabilizer. These officers claimed that the T69-II, which has a stabilizer, is "more accurate and has a higher rate of fire."

The RTA could upgrade its M48-A5s with modernization kits from Cadillac Gage that would give the tanks a stabilizer and an improved fire control system at a cost of only \$300,000 per tank. Although Cadillac Gage has done this for M-48s in Turkey and Taiwan, the Thai Army appears to prefer buying new equipment rather than upgrading old stuff. A few years ago, the RTA rejected a modernization package for their M-48A5s, instead buying cheap Chinese tanks and, most recently, the expensive Stingray light tank. The RTA probably would be better off with more Chinese tanks or upgraded M-48A5s than with the Stingray. Looking and handling more like a sports car than a tank, the Stingray comes with a steering wheel instead of the usual control sticks and can go zero to 32 kph in seven seconds. A U.S. military official dismissed the thinly-armored Stingray as a costly "gun carrier." When prodded about the armor, a Cadillac Gage salesman acknowledged that the tank can be pierced from the side and rear by .50 caliber machine gun slugs, but added that it is "an excellent weapon for counter-insurgency."

Gen. Tossaporn and other cavalry officers would welcome receiving new, high-performance tanks. Asked by reporters during the show whether he was interested in the U.S. M-1 Abrams tank, Gen Tossaporn's eyes lit up. But he added quickly, "Our Army Commander in Chief has said that for a poor country like Thailand we must look at the price as well as the quality." A local arms merchant said there is an unverified rumor that the Thai Army may purchase the West German Leopard II tank. Cavalry officers at Saraburi are certainly interested, but

they noted that "We can buy five or six Chinese tanks for the price of one Leopard." Expressing the thoughts of higher-ups who actually make purchasing decisions, Gen. Phat Akkanibutr, Deputy Supreme Commander of the Royal Thai Armed Forces told me that although Western equipment may be of better quality, Chinese armor arrives quickly and cheaply "when we need it."

Regarding APCs, Gen. Tossaporn stated that the light, Chinese M-85 is "more suitable" for Thai terrain than the American M-113. Other cavalry officers said they prefer the M-85 because it provides better covering fire from the sides and rear. Not surprisingly, the 2nd Cavalry Division uses only M-85s.

Although the 2nd Cavalry Division has had its Chinese tanks for over a year now, Gen. Tossaporn noted that some of his men are still adjusting to their new vehicles: "Most of them are up to standard, but some still have to practice." Gen. Tossaporn said that first-time drivers of the T69-II kept on stalling because of the manual transmission.

Some Thai and Western military officials believe that Western and Eastern equipment mix as well as oil and water. Gen. Tossaporn emphasized that using two types of equipment did not cause major problems since the battalion of T69-II's form the core of a separate regiment. But he conceded, "We have a small problem with spare parts." He and other officers said that using the new Chinese equipment did not lead to any changes in their tactics.

Various military analysts also maintain that, like most armies, the RTA could benefit from more large-scale exercises to further improve coordination. Gen. Tossaporn said that the cavalry doesn't hold exercises on the division level "because expenses are high, especially fuel." Apparently this was also a consideration when it practiced for the "demonstration of combat readiness." Although the 2nd Cavalry Division spent one month preparing for the show, officers said they could afford to drive their armor out to the parade ground and back (a distance of about two kilometers) for practice runs only three times.

If there is another display at Saraburi next year, spectators can expect to see a greater preponderance of Chinese hardware. Yet, American armor still retains its prestige. While Gen. Chavalit's assistants drove past the review stand in a squat, Chinese-built M-85 APC, the Commander himself rode atop a large machine with "Hell on Tracks" stenciled on its side: an American-made M-48A5 tank.

Sincerely,



Erik Guyot

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