

Thursday, April 5th, 2003
Sop Ruak, Thailand

IMAGES OF THE TAR HEELS
AND THE USA 15,000 MILES AWAY.

Monday Night. The last stop of March Madness. Carolina vs. Illinois. And tip off is just an hour away. Now I'm about as big a Tar Heel fan as they get. But here I am more than 15,000 miles away in a small village on the Thailand, Laos, Burma border trying to pick up the game on a satellite radio.

Now don't get me wrong, you LSU fans. I know of few other die hards who attend as many Tiger sporting events as do I. Oh, we all go to Tiger Stadium on Saturday night. I'm there for every home basketball game, track meet and a variety of other regularly scheduled sporting events. But Carolina gave me my education and a focus that set the tone for my life in years ahead.

Legendary Tar Heel basketball coach Dean Smith recruited me to come to Chapel Hill in 1959. I was his first recruit after he left the Air Force Academy and took the Carolina coaching job. I ended up not being much of a college basketball player, and ran track for Carolina instead. But I can legitimately lay claim to being Coach Smith's first recruit. Over the years, I have regularly reminded him of this, and as an acknowledgement he sent me autographed team basketballs after the Tar Heels won their last two national championships. I think some fellow named Jordan was on one of those teams.

So now I'm in the Chon Dan café' overlooking the Mekong River at what is called the Golden Triangle because of the opium trade that used to take place here. Many say it still does. My meal included Kai ping (charcoal-roasted eggs), khanom beuang (filled, sweet pancakes), khao tom mat (sticky rice served in banana leaves, and kaeng phanaeng (dry curry with coconut and basil.)

The waitress who was serving me told me in broken English that she really hoped to be a singer and come to America. I asked her to sing me her favorite American song. Without missing a beat, she went right into "You are My Sunshine." I asked her who Sunshine was? "It's her lover, who is far away and who she misses so much," she replied. I didn't have the heart to tell her that Sunshine was a horse buried by the roadside in Tensas Parish Louisiana.

I was finishing up a project on my laptop wearing a Carolina blue baseball cap. Three men sat at the next table, and one leaned over and spoke to me in broken English: "You are American? I like your cap."

"It's Carolina blue," I smiled and answered.

"Carolina blue?" He was puzzled.

"Yes. That's how we know God is a Tar Heel. He made the sky Carolina blue."

He looked perplexed. I didn't try to explain.

"Why do you come to the Golden Triangle?" he inquired.

"A little business, a little pleasure," I responded. I started to tell him this was close to the setting where Martin Sheen assassinates Marlon Brando in my favorite war movie, "Apocalypse Now." But I thought the better of it.

He asked me to join his group for tea, and said they were businessmen from Chiang Mai, Thailand's second largest city. We spent the next hour talking about their concerns over America's changing role of influence throughout Southeast Asia.

"In our business community, we often discuss America's future presence here," one of my hosts began. "We worry that you are spreading yourself too thin. You don't have the resources to go it alone and be the world's peacekeeper. 60,000 troops in South Korea and also Japan. The same in Germany and many

others spread throughout the world. And Iraq. How can your economy sustain such a huge cost?"

Another added: "Don't misread us. We are appreciative of your country. America's presence in our part of the world has been important in the past. You have helped to bring stability to our economy. But we are concerned that you are spreading yourselves too thin."

The main newspaper in Bangkok had carried a story in yesterday's edition expressing serious concerns on the health of the U.S. dollar. Our deficit in international transactions, mainly trade, reached an unprecedented \$666 billion in 2004, a 24% percent increase from the 2003 level and, at 5.7 percent of the economy, about two to three times what most economists consider sustainable.

"We follow these trends in your country closely. And you can't blame us if we have concerns and hedge our bets."

"Hedging their bets" means a closer relationship with China. The growing influence of the Chinese is prevalent wherever you go in this part of the world. For years, English was the only other language taught in schools throughout Southeast Asia. Now Chinese is the second language to learn. "We still teach English in our Thailand schools, but not as much. Chinese is becoming much more important."

My new friends were also puzzled about the wave of outsourcing that is taking place in America. "We just don't understand why you allow good jobs to go out of your country. This would never happen in our part of the world. Europe either. If we would let so many better paying jobs leave, we would be lowering our standard of living and quality of life for our people."

Anything to this? Well, yes. In recent years, the U.S. has lost millions of manufacturing jobs and hundreds of thousands of service jobs. And there is no reason to believe this trend will stop. There is much rhetoric from corporate America that outsourcing leads to more efficiency, competitiveness and productivity. But isn't this nothing more than a set of code words for lowest possible price for labor? Louisiana has been particularly hurt by U.S. commitments to the World Trade Organization and NAFTA. And you would be surprised to learn of the number of state and local agencies that do extensive business with companies who outsource, or public bodies that directly outsource themselves. (More on this next week.)

About all I could say to them was that the issue was "complicated" but that I couldn't disagree with much of what my new friends said. I had done more listening than talking or defending. But I left our interchange impressed with the observations of average local businessmen throughout this part of the world who both admire the U.S., but who have deep concerns about our economic stability and future.

I unfortunately had to end our discussion and move on. A boat was waiting to take me across the Mekong River to Laos.

Oh, about the game. I wasn't able to make the satellite connection to hear the play by play. But I wasn't worried. I knew the Tar Heels would win. You see, I walked outside of the café and looked up. The sky was bright. The sky was clear.

The sky was Carolina Blue.

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown