



# *The Last Legal Tiger Hunt in Thailand*

*The facts are all true, but  
what's the rest of the story?*

*By John McMahon*

TIGER, BY GUSTAVE SURAND (1860-1937)  
COURTESY OF PETER L. VILLA FINE ART, PEAPACK, NJ



Luang Chai starts the tale of the last wild tiger hunt in Thailand by describing what a rough place the mountains were in the 1970s. Full of bad hombres on the lam living in jungle hideouts. Not just bank robbers and murderers, but communist agitators set on ousting the king and overthrowing the Thai government.

"At the time that part of the country was still remote, still wild. Villages up in the mountains, in the jungle and forests, there were a lot of bad guys hiding out up there. Kao Yai was originally one of those little villages. At that time our job wasn't just keeping an eye on tourists — there weren't very many of them to take care of — we also had to look out for bad guys."

Luang Chai (Luang being the honorific for an elder male in the Thai language) today is a wiry old guy, never short of a cigarette as he works shirtless in his scrap yard. As a soldier in the '60s, before he was a park ranger, he and 40,000 other Thai soldiers did a stint in Vietnam backing US forces as part of the 9th battalion's Black Panthers out of Kanchanaburi, where we all live. So Luang Chai has a special dislike for those he still calls commie bastards in the stylized English he picked up from American soldiers during his years of service.

We weren't gathered to hear war stories this time. Instead, we came for another telling of the last tiger legally hunted and shot in Thailand. The hunt occurred in 1978 when a tiger attacked a young girl in one of those remote villages where bad guys hid out. By the early seventies, though, those remote villages were within the borders of Kao Yai national park.

Founded in 1962 as the first national park in Thailand, Kao Yai covers 837 square miles in the center of the country. It is today still the third largest, and is the flagship of the national park system. Only two hours from the urban crush of Bangkok, Kao Yai is known as a dense green getaway from the heat of the city. A place where visitors come to breathe fresh air and occasionally spot roaming wild elephants, gibbons gliding from tree to tree, Malaysian sun bears lounging, and great hornbills soaring in pairs.

Today there are no wild tigers in the park, at least officially, but in the 1970s there were still enough,

perhaps 200, that sightings weren't that rare. In fact, they were apparently a common problem around the sixth hole of the park's golf course, which also no longer exists.

*A young girl looking for a pencil she had dropped beneath her family's stilted house was attacked by the tiger. It fled when the screaming girl roused her neighbors, but the girl eventually died of her injuries. One ranger stayed overnight in the house, waiting for the tiger to return. When it did in the morning, the tiger leapt the two meters and killed the ranger with one swipe. The next night two rangers were stationed on the roof of the house. The tiger returned again in the night and one ranger shot the animal which was tracked down in the morning and killed.*

This is the explanation on a plaque beneath the stuffed remains of the killer tiger still on display in the park's visitors' center. The animal's hide is badly stretched over the mannequin beneath, giving it a shabby look that the fierce expression created by the taxidermist does little to overcome. There is paint peeling from the mouth and its glass eyes are slightly askew.

Luang Chai always enjoys hearing this simplistic account, guffawing and shaking his head at what he calls "just the facts, man, just the facts, but not the whole story."

Chai became a park ranger in 1972, after six years of military service. He tells how most of the rangers at the time were local boys who joined for the uniform, by borrowing the family rifle. Rangers and police in Thailand provide their own firearms, then and now. "Rangers without shoes, no walkie, some couldn't read or write," he explains. Chai, on the other hand, was a professional soldier who carried his Garand M1 rifle on the job, a rifle he still refers to as the "Marine's best friend."



The facts, as he says, are all true, but the story he tells is much grander. A young girl was attacked by the tiger while playing beneath her family's home. The tiger had been sighted around the village in the weeks before, and in fact was suspected of having already killed an old man who lived as a kind of hermit, getting by selling wild honey in the villages when he could collect it. His body was found some days before, mostly eaten and with numerous animal footprints around it, including that of an old tiger.

The guard that was mauled to death was not a professional, in Chai's opinion. He says the guard stayed in the house, and when the tiger returned, as all thought it would, to look for the prey it had found earlier, the guard stuck his head out the window.

"Out the window! Why, he want to say hello, maybe come in for a beer?" The tiger nearly took the young man's head off and was in the act of pulling him out of the window when villagers again struck up a racket and drove it away. Then they posted two more boys to shoot the thing from the roof.

Luang suspects the villagers and local rangers hadn't alerted the park's headquarters because they wanted the tiger's corpse to piece out and sell to practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine, who would pay a lot of money. "Remember, many gamblers and bad men in those small villages. Now two boys sat on the roof all night waiting for the tiger to return? Two boys of that age, I think they got drunk," says Luang, who marks the fact that one got off a glancing shot as nothing but luck.

In the morning they had a wounded, proven man eater lurking around the village and so the call came into headquarters and the professionals were summoned. Chai and about ten other trained rangers came to the area and recruited another 20 or so men and boys as beaters. They were all led by an older man, not a ranger, but a park manager. He had once, many decades before, been a sport hunter and wildlife guide in what must have seemed to be the inexhaustible jungles of central and western Thailand of the 1930s and '40s. He was a man who could track, and who knew the ways of tigers — a man who once guided royalty and wealthy men of importance from around the world on hunts from elephant-back howdahs.

They had no elephants for this hunt, but news of the wounded tiger had traveled as far as the Chok-

chai ranch, a famous (and still operating) cowboy outfit created by a Thai-Chinese tycoon obsessed with American cowboys. He appeared with three or four of his ranch hands on horseback to add support. "There was Mr. Chockchai, all 5'2" of him, on his fine horse in the best silks and silver with these big tough cowboys from Texas wearing thumb busters on their hips."

The wounded tiger had slunk out of the village and through the surrounding scrub jungle towards a small river, which at that time of the year would have been raging and act as a border. The head man reckoned from the blood trail the tiger left that it would be holed up near the water, in dense cover, while it licked its wound and waited for night to fall. He split up the men, posting the horses on the paths that led in and out of the village to cut the cat off if it backtracked. The beaters would spread out in an arc with their pots and pans to drive the tiger back into a dead-end box canyon, where the shooters could surround it.

"He warned us all that a wounded tiger, even an old wounded tiger, was the most dangerous of all. That we might be inches from the animal and never see it. He told us how on a hunt in deep grass, a beater was pulled down a meter from his friend and dragged invisibly for two kilometers before they found the poor bastard hidden in a tree to be eaten later on."

With that encouragement, they set off into the bush. Twenty-five beaters swept out in a strolling arc, beating pots and pans or hand drums or wooden cow bells and yelling at the top of their lungs to scare the tiger, but also perhaps out of fear they might be next — that they might be silently stolen away by the old beast.

The shooters stalked close behind carrying their motley collection of rifles and shotguns in the ready position, confident that if the tiger struck it would be a beater and not one of them that went down. "Many of the other weapons were in poor condition or too small caliber to do any good. The shotguns were loaded with #4 shot only, anything else almost impossible to get in Thailand then. I carried my Garand M1 rifle with a full magazine of Springfield .30-06." Chai lets this information hang in the hot afternoon air before he adds "The gun that General

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Patton called ‘the greatest battle implement ever devised,’ as he often does when speaking of his beloved Garand that holds a place of honor in the office nook of his workshop.

They progressed through the morning, with the beaters making a hell of a racket and the shooters pulling up at anything that moved, as birds, mammals, and reptiles of all sorts and species fled before them. Hours into the hunt, an explosion of excitement erupted on the right flank, so Chai pulled up from his center position and ran to the source of the shouting, although he knew from his military training that he shouldn’t.

“I was terribly excited, though; this was a tiger, and a man killer to boot.”

They pinpointed the animal’s deep growl to a thicket of spiky bamboo growing on the steep banks of the river. As the men circled the area, the low steady warning was replaced by what Chai calls the skeetches, as the cat spat and hissed and pawed the ground. They could only just see the animal’s silhouette, swaying back and forth in the shadowy growth, but the sound was ferocious and its smell was terrible.

When the manager arrived, he asked what the hell the men were waiting for. They weren’t on a game hunt. This was a wounded man eater, and he ordered them to fire. The beaters, who now took up the rear, put their hands over their ears as the men blasted into the stand of tough bamboo, but Chai held his fire. “What could I shoot at? There was nothing to aim for!”

Amidst the random blasting, one of the shooters must have scored a hit, because the cat leapt straight up, paws thrashing the air, tearing at the bamboo and yowling. Chai had his target and leveled off to fire, along with two or three of the other riflemen. When the explosion of gunfire had settled, the park manager and two beaters armed with lances cut from bamboo went into the thicket to retrieve the animal.

Luang Chai insists it was his bullet that left the hole in the center of the tiger’s cranium, which can still be seen

in its preserved hide, on display today — that it was his bullet that ended the last legal tiger hunt in the kingdom. “Of course it was my shot; I was the only one there trained as a marksman, with the powerful gun to kill a tiger.”

When the corpse was inspected, it indeed turned out to be an old female. Measuring just seven feet in length, and weighing only 250 pounds, she was very thin, with broken teeth. Too old to hunt the park’s already diminished prey, she was likely drawn to the village after an easy meal of dog or cat. She most likely mistook the girl for an animal crawling under the house. The guard she had killed out of surprise; self-defense in a way.

In the end, the villagers skinned her out, intending to eat the heart and sell off the other valuable bits. The park manager claimed the hide for posterity, even as Mr. Chokchai offered him cash for it on the spot, despite it being shot full of holes.

Luang Chai is proud to have been part of that hunt, just as he is proud to have served in Vietnam. But he is more proud of his 32 years as a national park ranger. In his own words, he was “paid to walk around in and protect such a natural paradise as Kao Yai.” Today, photographs of that great natural world line the walls of his house and shop.

Tigers disappeared altogether from Kao Yai in the mid-‘80s, but survived in small numbers in several other national parks and preserves in Thailand. This was just about the time the world was starting to understand that tigers would soon be extinct if something wasn’t done about habitat encroachment. Awareness campaigns were begun to try to keep the species alive in the wild.

Since then, Thailand’s wilderness preservation programs have begun to eliminate the tourist shows and “Tiger Temples,” where drugged-out animals pose for photos and do tricks for hot dogs. Wild tigers number as few as 200 across Thailand, and somewhere between 3,000 and 4,000 the world over, according to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

There is no longer any legal hunting in Thailand, with the exception of frogs and field rats, though poaching

remains a serious problem in the last few vast forest areas that will support tigers, leopards, gaurs, and other large mammals. Against all odds, a new breeding group of tigers was discovered in Thap Lan national park in 2017, numbering about 18 animals, including cubs. A plan is now underway to create a wilderness corridor between the two parks so that mature tigers might move into Kao Yai for the first time in more than 30 years. ■

*John McMahon is a painter and writer who has spent the last twenty years traveling and working. His work can be seen on platforms and publications all across the English-speaking world. His book list is available on Amazon.*