

A Brief Biography of Sir Robert Grainger Ker Thompson

Based on Thompson's Autobiography

Make for the Hills *Memories of Far Eastern Wars*

London: Leo Cooper, 1989

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Because of his military and government careers and book publications, Robert Thompson (1916-1992) became an influential figure in post-World War II counterinsurgency analysis. He fought in Burma during World War II, served in the Malayan civil service from 1946 to 1960, and played a significant role in Malaysian independence and the defeat of its communist insurgency. Recommended by Field Marshall Sir Gerald Templer, Thompson served on the British Advisory Mission to Vietnam from (1961-1964), advised the South Vietnamese police force (1964-65), and consulted for the RAND Corporation (1966-68). When Richard Nixon was elected president of the United States in 1969, Thompson became military consultant to the White House. He made frequent trips to South Vietnam until its defeat in 1975.

Family Background and Education

Robert Thompson was born 12 April 1916, the son of Canon W. G. Thompson, an Anglican priest. He had a brother and sister. During Thompson's childhood and youth his family lived in Charlwood, Surrey, located a few miles west of Gatwick Airport. Being a sporting youth who loved riding as well as shooting and fishing, Thompson had fond memories of Gatwick Racecourse before it was replaced by the airport. He attended Marlborough College in Wiltshire, which was a private (in England "public") high school for the education of the sons of English priests. He then attended Sydney Sussex College at Cambridge where he received a Masters Degree in history.

While at Cambridge, Thompson joined the University Air Squadron in 1936 and eventually received a commission in the Reserve of Air Force Officers. After graduating from Cambridge he attended Oxford University for a one year Colonial Service course. He arrived at Malaya in 1938 at the age of twenty-two. Soon after, he was sent to Macao to learn Cantonese.

World War II 1939-1945

World War II started 1 September 1939 while Thompson was stationed at Macao. All cadets learning Chinese were initially moved to Hong Kong in 1940 and then returned to Macao in 1941. On 7 December 1941 Japan attacked Great Britain at Hong Kong and the United States at Hawaii. When Hong Kong was attacked, Thompson was visiting from Macao. Along with several army friends he escaped immediate

capture. Thanks to his fluency in Cantonese, over a period of three to four months he eventually made his way to Burma. This was his first experience as an insurgent working behind enemy lines. He was then flown to Calcutta and Delhi, where he rejoined the Royal Air Force (RAF) as a Flight-Lieutenant.

Thompson's second experience as an insurgent working behind enemy lines came with his posting to Brigadier General Orde Wingate's Chindit or Special Force. British forces in Burma were defeated by the Japanese partly because they were dependent on supplies delivered by road transport. They were one-dimensional. Wingate's novel idea was to utilize British superiority in radio communications and air power for deep incursions behind enemy lines in difficult terrain. This special force of two battalions became known as the Chindits. The name "Chindit" is a corruption of the Burmese "Chinthay", which is a mythical beast often found in the form of statues protecting Burmese temples. In 1943 they were officially known as the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade. In 1944 the name changed to the Indian 3rd Infantry Division, which numbered six brigades. In two expeditions, Thompson served as RAF liaison providing radio instructions to pilots for air support, parachuting supplies, and landing in rough air strips. He described the Chindit's missions as "Long Range Penetration, as developed in North Africa and Ethiopia, adapted to the mountain jungle terrain of South-East Asia."^[1]

Near the end of the war, Thompson was transferred to regular units pushing the Japanese out of Burma, where he continued to serve as an RAF liaison officer.

Orde Wingate was killed in a plane crash 24 on March 1944. In his biography, Thompson dedicated an entire chapter (VII) in support of Wingate's memory and military achievements. "Wingate was the person who had dominated my life and thinking for three years of the war and who had a profound influence on me for the rest of my life."^[2]

To this day the Chindit's achievements are controversial. Thompson comments that Wingate's main qualities were vision, courage, determination, and a superior intellect that made enemies of lesser mortals. "In strategic concept and ideas Wingate was ahead of his time."^[3] What most impressed Thompson was the negative psychological effect which the Chindits produced on the Japanese high command in Burma. He believed the Japanese generals were defeated psychologically before they were defeated at Imphal, the great battle on the Indian eastern plain which turned the tide of the war in Burma. His final assessment of Wingate is summarized in the following passage.

I am quite sure that history will accept that the counterstroke of landing the Chindits in northern Burma was a, if not the, major factor in saving Imphal . . . Wingate succeeded in taking [General Renya] Mutaguchi's eye off the ball and, after the war, Mutaguchi acknowledged this by recognizing Wingate as the man 'in whom I found my match'.^[4]

The Malayan Emergency 1948-1960

After demobilization Thompson was loaned back to the Colonial service with the rank of Squadron Leader. He returned to Malaya in January 1946 and was posted to Ipoh city and district in the northwestern state of Perak as Advisor on Chinese Affairs. He was quickly promoted to Wing Commander in the Malaya Military Administration. He

was now thirty. Soon after he was appointed Assistant Commissioner of Labour for Perak state.

Robert Thompson worked in Malaya from 1946 to 1960. During those fourteen years he participated, albeit in a minor capacity, in two important historical developments. The first was the eventual granting of independence to the Federation of Malaya on 31 August 1957.^[5] The second was the defeat of a serious communist insurgency which lasted between 1948 and 1960. For political reasons this was known as the “Malayan Emergency” rather than the ‘Malayan War’.^[6]

After his marriage to Merryn Newbould in 1950, Thompson became Assistant Commissioner of Labour for Johore state and Advisor on Chinese Affairs. He was in Johore when the British High Commissioner for Malaya, Sir Henry Gurney, was killed by Chinese communists 6 October 1951. The next High Commissioner was General Gerald Templer who was mainly responsible for the defeat of the Malayan Emergency by 1954.^[7]

In 1952, Thompson was appointed Secretary to the Member for Home Affairs which looked after Information Services, Registration, Immigration and Aboriginal Affairs. He claimed that the Information Services played an important role in defeating the communist insurgents. His first real office job was located in Kuala Lumpur where he was able to witness first hand Templer’s effective counterinsurgency tactics and strategy. In only three years (1951-1954) Templer destroyed the main communist guerrilla forces. The remaining six years were a gradual mopping up operation. Thompson’s admiration for Templer is expressed in the following quotation.

In May, 1954, General Templer left Malaya to become Chief of the Imperial General Staff. He had not ended the Emergency but he had broken its back and the task for his successor was no more than that of mopping up. It was an outstanding achievement and he was the last of the great British pro-counsels. I treasure immensely the memory of having seen a great man in action. To achieve great things it is often necessary, as it was in Malaya, to be fairly ruthless and to take tough decisions. It is the measure of Templer’s greatness that he was able to retain the devotion and respect of everyone. The whole country knew him and admired him for what he had done. Those in high places never missed an opportunity later to invite him and Lady Templer back to Malaya to show their gratitude.^[8]

Although Templer may have been ruthless when dealing with communist insurgents, for example by moving villages, and detaining and deporting suspected terrorists, his main goal was always political. That is, his plan was to build a democratic and civil infrastructure that would be self-sustaining. The military goal always fit in with the larger context of the political goal. In this he, and his successors, succeeded. As a mid-level civil servant, Thompson was well-placed to see how the nuts and bolts of this program actually worked through the administration of the Malayan rule of law. Thanks to this disciple-mentor relationship, one decade later Thompson attempted to apply Templer’s lessons to Vietnam.

Early in 1955, Thompson moved to Singapore to become Colonial Service deputy for only a few months. This was his highest civil service placement and came with a house, house-servants, car and driver. His superior, Malcolm MacDonald, was

Commissioner General for South-East Asia. In this role Thompson began to meet with international leaders and ambassadors from south-east Asia. With MacDonald as chairman of the British Defense Coordinating Committee, Thompson was introduced to strategic regional defense planning for south-east Asia.

Later in 1955, Thompson moved again to Kuala Lumpur to take the position of Coordinating Officer Security for the newly formed Malaya Defense Ministry. In 1956 he became Deputy Secretary for Defense and Internal Security (Armed Forces and Police) and held this position until his retirement from the Malaya Civil Service in 1960. Therefore, he played a significant contributing role leading up to Malayan independence on 31 August 1957 and three years following.

Advisor on Communist Counterinsurgency 1960-1989

During his last years as Deputy Secretary for Defense and Internal Security, Thompson met the new president of South Vietnam, Ngo dinh Diem. In 1954 the Paris Accords had temporarily divided Vietnam into north and south parts pending a unifying future election. Diem became president of South Vietnam in 1955 after a referendum organized by his brother Ngo dinh Nhu. One or two years later, communist North Vietnam supported the Vietcong insurgency in South Vietnam, thus beginning the Second Indo-China War. During his first visit to Malaya, Diem was impressed at how the young country had successfully defeated its communist insurgency. Therefore, just before Thompson retired from the Malayan Civil Service in April 1960, Diem invited him to tour South Vietnam. At Diem's request, Thompson wrote a long report on Malayan counterinsurgency methods which he forwarded to Diem with Field Marshall Templer's commendation. In his report Thompson made the following recommendations.

1. South Vietnam should organize its counterinsurgency efforts through a civilian Emergency Operations Council and through the Executive Committees [similar to] Malaya's states and districts.
2. It should operate a single intelligence agency.
3. It should improve all communications channels especially wireless.
4. It should pay more attention to psychological warfare.
5. It should increase the use of naval patrols in the Mekong Delta.[\[9\]](#)

Malaya's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, then recommended to Diem that Thompson make a second visit to South Vietnam as an advisor on counterinsurgency matters.

The above events explain how a relative unknown, in terms of military, political and academic status, began a third career in counterinsurgency analysis. Thompson retired from the military with the rank of Wing Commander in the Malayan air force. He retired from his civil service career as deputy secretary to an elected cabinet minister. Although these are notable achievements they are not front page news. His smooth transition to counterinsurgency expert came because of his broad, practical experience, and because his expertise was recognized by superiors. His third career, therefore, was simply a natural extension of his earlier military and governmental

experiences. What also helped along the way were quality mentors such as Orde Wingate and Gerald Templer, to whom, in his biography, he gives due credit.

Head of the British Advisory Mission to Saigon

Soon after returning to Malaya from Vietnam, Thompson and his family moved to England in April, 1960, where they bought a house in Winsford, west Somerset, in the heart of Exmoor National Park. They happily remained there for the next twenty-five years where he was able to enjoy his passion for the outdoors, horses, hunting and fishing. He was only 45 and far from official retirement.

By this time (1960) the Second Indo-China War was heating up. The first few U.S. military advisors had arrived in South Vietnam in 1950. By 1961, there were 2,000. By 1965, the first U.S. ground troops would arrive in the form of 3,500 Marines. By 1968, U.S. military involvement would reach its maximum strength at 500,000. Motivated by this escalating psychology, in 1960 the United Kingdom wanted to improve the Anglo-American alliance by sending a small civilian British Advisory Mission (BRIAM) to Saigon. Because both Field Marshall Templer and Tunku Abdul Rahman highly recommended Thompson there was no doubt who would head the mission. Nevertheless, resistance from the United States and Diem delayed Thompson's arrival in South Vietnam for one-and-a-half years until 18 September 1961. He selected a four-man civilian unit (later expanded to five), former British Colonial Service officers who had first-hand knowledge of communist insurgency in Malaya. BRIAM also had an administrative staff of three, plus occasional specialists attached for limited periods.

Thompson began earlier by visiting Washington, D.C., where he met with General Maxwell Taylor (President Kennedy's military advisor and later Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff until 1964) and Walt Rostow (Deputy Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs), some CIA officials, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Lemnitzer. Through later experience, Thompson was to learn that the "American reputation for management is a myth and that their efficiency, such as it is, depends solely upon abundance and therefore waste."^[10] For example, once BRIAM arrived in South Vietnam, Thompson discovered that not one American military advisor or officer encountered by the team had studied the French defeat during the First Indo-China War, and none had studied the writings and military history of Mao Zedung.

Very early, Thompson discovered that the United States had no idea how to conduct a meaningful counterinsurgency campaign in a young democracy. *Americans especially did not understand that "to win the war they had to build the country"*. The following lengthy quotation expresses his candid observations.

It soon became clear that the insurgency in Vietnam was on a much greater scale than that in Malaya. Secondly, the South Vietnamese Government did not have the administrative structure nor the experienced officers to cope with it. This was particularly true of the Mekong Delta, which was the former French colony of Cochin-China, where official posts right down to the postmaster had been filled by Frenchmen. This administrative weakness was never properly addressed by the United States. Americans (and the very great majority involved in Vietnam were only there for short spells) never

understood that to win the war they had to build a country. It could not be won by military means alone. On the military side the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) had been built up to such an extent that the whole social, economic and political life of the country was out of balance. Worse still, it was a totally conventional army, suitable for meeting a North Korean invasion, not a North Vietnamese-directed insurgency.[\[11\]](#)

On the diplomatic and military side, the Americans made many strategic and tactical errors which Thompson patiently points out. One example will suffice, which concerned the Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos and Cambodia. The trail allowed North Vietnam to supply the Vietcong along the entire western border of South Vietnam. When President Kennedy successfully placed a Marine regiment in north-east Thailand, with Thai approval, the Ho Chi Minh trail was potentially at risk. In 1962 the Russians, Chinese and North Vietnamese quickly reconvened the Geneva Conference to insure the future neutrality of Laos through Article 4.[\[12\]](#) Because the breaking of Article 4 carried no sanctions, most war observers automatically assumed two things: first, that the North Vietnamese would never comply; second, that Senator William Fulbright and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee would strictly enforce compliance with Protocol 4 on the American side. Again, Thompson's blunt comments are worthwhile repeating.

The [Geneva] Conference gave Mr. Averell Harriman (former ambassador to Russia and Governor of New York) the first opportunity to exercise his baleful influence on the war and to become one of the architects of his country's defeat. He thought that the Conference was about establishing a neutral government in Laos with the three factions joined together in a "troika" coalition. The communist side knew better. Its vital aim was to secure for the North Vietnamese a free run down through Laos . . . We renamed the Ho Chi Minh trail the Averell Harriman Expressway.[\[13\]](#)

On November 2nd, 1963, President Diem and his brother Nhu were murdered during a successful military coup, and the government was taken over by a Revolutionary Military Council ruled by General Du'ong Van Minh. Unfortunately, this brought no substantive improvements politically or militarily. Realizing the futility of the situation, BRIAM agreed to close the mission down by 1965.

While shaken by the murder of Diem (rather than his overthrow) everyone, including myself, indulged in some optimistic wishful thinking that the Government's performance would be improved and that the Generals would get on with the war. The only noticeable improvement was that we could now dance publicly in the night clubs. The real outcome was that the United States were firmly hooked to the Generals, and the Generals had not a clue what to do. Reggie Burrows, the Counselor at our Embassy, had drawn up in advance a programme of what ought to be done after a coup. Our Ambassador took it down to [US Ambassador to South Vietnam] Cabot Lodge the day after the coup. Lodge was absolutely stunned that, with hundreds on his staff, no one had thought of it—except the small British Embassy.[\[14\]](#)

By 1965, North Vietnam had infiltrated regular troops into the south, which Thompson claims was in grave danger of being cut in half. BRIAM closed down just as the first U.S. regular forces made their appearance and as the U.S. Air Force began to bomb North Vietnam, staving off defeat for another ten years.

A First Book, More Visits, White House Advisor

While in Saigon, Thompson began working on a book which he eventually published in 1966 as, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*. In it he outlined the lessons he learned from World War II, Malaya, and Vietnam.

Starting in 1966, he was invited back to South Vietnam by USAID to give advice on the proper training of local police forces. He also made return visits as a consultant for the RAND Corporation. During one visit he arrived in Saigon a few days after the Tet offensive, which started 31 January 1968. He claims that the battle was a military defeat for Hanoi and a psychological and political defeat for the United States.

When Richard Nixon became president of the United States in 1969, he requested that Thompson advise him on Vietnam. This resulted in several more visits to South Vietnam between 1969 and 1975, which included visits to other south-east Asian countries.

With Nixon's presidency, there began a gradual reduction of U.S. armed forces from the peak of 1968, which was called the "Vietnamization of the war". Thompson was in Saigon for the ceasefire, which came into effect at 8 am local time, 28 January, 1973. On 15 August of the same year, the Case-Church Amendment was passed in the U.S. Congress, overcoming a presidential veto and forcing President Nixon to withdraw American troops from South Vietnam completely. This led to the final invasion of the south by North Vietnam in 1975. Thompson made his last trip to South Vietnam in February, 1975. Saigon fell in April.

Final Publications, Lectures and Travels

In 1969, Thompson published his second book titled, *No Exit from Vietnam*. In the same year he was a founding member of a London-based British think tank named the Institute for the Study of Conflict. It was replaced by the Institute for the Study of Conflict and Terror in 1990. Also in 1970 he published *Revolutionary Warfare in World Strategy*. He published *Peace Is Not at Hand* in 1974.

Between 1975 and 1979 he was invited annually to lecture at the four main U.S. military colleges. He claims he was always invited back because he was the only person who could cover the entire Vietnam War in fifty minutes. His last lecture was given at a Washington conference on Low Intensity Warfare in 1986 when he was 70. His autobiography, *Make for the Hills*, was published in 1989.

South Korea invited him to visit in 1976. In 1979 he visited Hong Kong and China. His last visit to south-east Asia occurred in 1981, when he toured Hong Kong, Malaysia and Thailand.

Robert Thompson died 16 May, 1992, at the age of 76.

A Final Word from Robert Thompson

The damage done to American scholarship and comment was one of the greatest casualties of the Vietnam war. It should not have needed Alexander Solzhenitsyn to pronounce that all these moral grimaces

were being used solely to justify and excuse a greater moral cowardice.^[15]

[1] Robert Thompson, *Make for the Hills: Memories of Far Eastern Wars* (London: Leo Cooper, 1989; hardcover edition), 23.

[2] *Ibid.*, 71.

[3] *Ibid.*, 72.

[4] *Ibid.*, 76.

[5] The British ruled the Malay Peninsula, including Singapore, as a protectorate from the eighteenth century until 1946. From 1946 to 1957 the Malayan Colonial Service purposely prepared the country for independence. Between 1946 and 1948 they created the Malay Union to centralize government offices in Kuala Lumpur. This became the Federation of Malaya 1948-1957. Independence was granted 31 August 1957. The country's name was changed to "Malaysia" in 1963. In 1965 Singapore was expelled and became an independent nation.

[6] The post-World War II period from 1945 to 1970 witnessed the high water mark of international communism. After 1945, the Soviet Union consolidated its eastern European satellites. After a 22-year civil war, Mao Zedung gained control of China in 1949. The First Indo-China War 1946-1954 ended with the victory of the communist Viet Minh army and the 1954 division of Vietnam by the Paris Accords. Soon after the international communist movement held its 1948 Calcutta conference, communist insurgencies began in Malaya, the Philippines, Indonesia and Burma.

[7] The first "Malayan Emergency" lasted between 1948 and 1960. A second "Communist Insurgency" carried on 1967-1989. During the first Emergency there were only about 5,000 communist insurgents living in the jungle. Most were Chinese.

[8] *Make for the Hills*, 102-103.

[9] Peter Busch, *All the Way with JFK: The U.S. and the Vietnam War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 70.

[10] *Make for the Hills.*, 124.

[11] *Ibid.*, 127-128.

[12] Article 4 of the Protocol to the Declaration of the Neutrality of Laos reads as follows: "The introduction of foreign and irregular troops, foreign paramilitary formations and foreign military personnel into Laos is prohibited."

[13] *Make for the Hills*, 132.

[14] *Ibid.*, 142.

[15] *Ibid.*, 186.