

Several months ago native islander, Leroy O'Neal, sent me a story about his Uncle Kelly O'Neal (1911-1987) and the 1951 revolution in Siam (Thailand). Sometimes called The Manhattan Revolt, it was led by a group from the Siamese Navy under the command of Lieutenant Commander Manas Jurupa.

Kelly O'Neal, like many Ocracokers of his generation, had taken work in Philadelphia, and eventually obtained command of the hopper dredge Manhattan, a vessel on which many an Ocracoker served. Following is the exciting story of how Captain Kelly survived the bloody, and ultimately failed, revolution.

---

The hot, sweltering Thailand sun, beating down on the strange drama unfolding aboard the hopper dredge Manhattan, gave everything an appearance of unreality. At first, Captain Kelly O'Neal, veteran of the U.S. army Corps of Engineers, thought the whole thing was a crazy practical joke.

It was midday of June 29, 1951. Beside O'Neal stood the dapper Prime Minister of Siam. Field Marshal P. Pibulsonggram, trim in his white uniform. With full Oriental pomp and ceremony the Manhattan was being turned over to the Thai government.



Then, a second later, the ceremony became a nightmare. O'Neal looked down at the steel muzzle of a Tommy gun rammed hard into his belly. From the ranks of the honor guard, other Siamese closed in, their fingers nervously tightening around automatic weapons.

Two soldiers gripped the Prime Minister by the arms and spun him around. His face white, he said to O'Neal, "I'm sorry this had to happen — I'm deeply sorry!"

In this freakish manner did one of the most fantastic revolutions of recent years explode under the nose of the skipper of an American vessel. Before it ended, O'Neal was to see blood run in the streets and be forced to flee for his life and somehow live to escape death in the panic ridden jungle capitol.

Never before told, the story, which reached such unbelievable proportions that a full-scale war was narrowly averted in the little Communist-surrounded nation, began 13,822 miles

away in peaceful Philadelphia. After 47 years service dredging American seaports and waterways, the Manhattan had gone into storage. Then, early in 1951, the Thai government requested that she be sent to Bangkok to open the Chaupaya River for shipping. This was arranged through a deal with the Economic Cooperation Administration in Washington.

(Missing photo of the Dredge Manhattan)

O'Neal and 16 crewmen began the long delivery voyage on April 4. Refueling at Panama, Honolulu, and Balikpapan, Borneo, the Manhattan leisurely nosed up the Chaupaya River on June 23rd. O'Neal brought her in on high tide to the Kong Toi docks, then tied up at the entrance to the King's Royal Palace, an incredible majestic anchorage on the river.

During the crossing, O'Neal's crew had painted the barge, shined the brass and turned her into as handsome a craft as one nation ever gave to another. It was to American interest to remain friendly with the Thai government. No other nation in the world is so completely surrounded by Communist pressure. But there was a problem. Since 1932, when a bloodless coup by a group of young officers forced the constitutional government upon the reigning king, there have been 11 major revolutions, five different constitutions and 20 changes of administration.

Revolutions in Siam normally are bloodless affairs, short struggles between Thai army and navy brass. In fact, until O'Neal arrived, the major revolutions were looked upon as a sort of annual "Army-Navy Game."

Six days after her arrival at Bangkok the Manhattan lay at the pier in full regalia for the ceremony under which she would become property of the Siamese government. Buddhist priests, in full dress, began the day by blessing the dredge. Her 288-foot hull was encircled with string, to protect ship and crew from evil spirits. Gaily colored ribbons and thousands of flowers turned the Manhattan into something resembling a float from the Pasadena Rose Parade. Thousands of Siamese jammed the pier, while government officials swarmed aboard, walking up the gangplank on a red plush carpet.

The American flag was lowered as a band played the Star Spangled Banner. Then the band struck up the Siamese national anthem, as Thailand's flag was hoisted on the stern. Unknown to O'Neal, that ceremony was the signal that touched off the most fantastic revolution in modern history.

Prime Minister Pibulsonggram, accompanied by his personal bodyguard, the Chief of Police of Bangkok, swept aboard to be met by O'Neal and officials of the ECA. Behind him came a

troupe of lovely Siamese ladies bearing a glittering golden tray some five feet square. In the center of the tray was a beautiful wreath of tropical flowers which Pibulsonggram placed on the Manhattan's bow for the Buddhist priests to bless.

O'Neal then led the party back toward amidships to conclude the transfer ceremony. He never got there. With no warning, a helmeted honor guardsman stepped from the ranks and jammed the end of an ugly machine gun in his guts. "Step back, please, Captain!" he snapped in good English. "I must arrest the Prime Minister!"

Pibulsonggram paled as other guards grabbed him and shoved him unceremoniously toward the gangplank. In amazement, O'Neal watched them march the little man off the Manhattan and aboard an LST.

Suddenly the harbor was alive with armed revolutionists. In amazement O'Neal saw the little men with big guns leaping from small boats, from the docks, from the piers, from the honor guards, like swarming bees. Shots echoed across the water and screams of the wounded told the Manhattan's crew this was no Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. It was a full-scale revolt.

Running to the ship's rail O'Neal watched the LST cut around the bow of the Manhattan and head swiftly upriver. Guards on the small boat raised their automatic rifles.

"Hit the deck!" O'Neal shouted to his crew. "They're opening up on us!"

The fact that the Manhattan's crew were American citizens seemed to make no difference to the Prime Minister's captors. With deadly aim they splattered lead over the gaily-decked dredge. Bullets whined overhead and ricocheted dangerously close to the Americans.

In a panic the men dropped to the deck and crawled out windows and doors to safety. An ominous quiet fell over the dredge. O'Neal switched on the radio. Throughout the day and far into the night the Americans listened to a strange war of words as Thailand's five pro-government stations and the pro-revolutionist Royal Navy station hurled a barrage of words to the people of Siam.

Major Karoon Kengradomying now screamed denunciations against the revolutionists, charging them with breaching Article 60 of the Constitution and gaining disfavor of the United Nations by capturing the Prime Minister.

And pro-revolutionist Navy broadcasts from the embattled base at suburban Thonburi featured a recording of the voice of Field Marshal Pibulsonggram in which the kidnapped

Premier appealed to the armed forces to remain calm.

The Army Signals station denounced the recording as a total fraud. The Navy station retaliated with lively martial music, the Navy march, "Anchors Aweigh," the Marine Corps' "To the Shores of Tripoli" and "Let's Make a Bonfire of Our Troubles and Watch Them Blaze Away."

On the other side, the Territorial Defense Publicity Department and Post Office stations fired back more stirring music. Threats of punishment for the rebels came regularly from the Air Force station.

O'Neal's crew sat listening, perplexed at the way the Siamese pull off a revolution. It was difficult to guess what would happen next. The Pibulsonggram government quickly reorganized under Nai Vorakarn Bancha, Minister of Foreign Affairs, with support of the Army, Police Department and the Royal Air Force.

RAF bombers swept into action, diving over the revolutionists' stronghold at Thonburi. Among the coup leaders, said the radio, was Air Marshal Luang Thavarit, retired Commander-in-chief of the RAF and a Member of Parliament. Boss of the coup forces seemed to be Lt. Gen. Luang Kaoh Sengkram, former Deputy Commander of the Army.

Anxiously, O'Neal and his men followed news reports translated for them by the Siamese crew members who remained aboard when the revolution broke out. Throughout Bangkok, the noise of gunfire rattled incessantly. Thai naval units were grouped at three points — Thonburi, The Royal Landing, where the Manhattan lay helpless, and at the radio station on Wireless Road.

Thirty Marines temporarily forced their way into the Wat Liab Power station but were repulsed. Army detachments set up roadblocks on Ploenchit Road to contain the radio station unit. All ships of the Siamese fleet were ordered into action. The Army called for all officers and men to mobilize.

Chain-smoking their supply of American cigarets, the dredge crew lay in their hot bunks, stripped to the waist, listening to the amazing radio war, punctuated through the night by the sound of gunfire. By morning the situation was becoming dangerous. At 8:00 A.M. a pall of smoke boiled up from the Tathien Landing gasoline dump on the Bangkok side of the river, opposite Wat Arun.

The Navy radio went off the air shortly afterward, and by 11:00 A.M. Navy warcraft were

hurling shells into Bangkok, causing many casualties among both Thai and foreign residents. Anti-aircraft shells exploded on New Road on the outskirts of Bangkok, killing three defenseless civilians. Withering crossfire slashed through treetops in the British Embassy compound and then shells began pounding straight into the American Embassy on Sathorn road.

O'Neal turned to the others. "I think we'd better get the hell off this ship!"

Quickly the crew lowered a lifeboat into the river, listening to the sound of gunfire coming closer and closer. Joined by one Siamese, the dredgemen began rowing upriver, hell bent for anywhere but Bangkok. For nine grueling hours they pulled through the sweltering afternoon and night until the Siamese tapped O'Neal on the back and pointed to shore.

In friendly territory, the crew relaxed while O'Neal set out on a three-mile hike to find a telephone and call the American Embassy. By the time he got the call through, however, the embassy was empty, except for a non-English speaking guard. O'Neal at last gave up and headed back toward the landing.

Suddenly the staccato crack of a Thompson gun split the night air. Bullets whined close behind O'Neal and his guide thudding into a high brick wall surrounding the large home of a government official where he had found the telephone. The faster he ran, the faster the gunfire came. At the last second O'Neal dove through a gate to safety.

Back with his crew, he wiped the sweat from his face with his sleeve and let out a long breath. "A hell of a reception for the Manhattan," he grinned.

Shortly after daybreak, a procession of autos rolled up to where the crew had hidden. Politely they were escorted back into town and put up at the Princess Hotel. There the Americans stayed for a full week, living on duck eggs, potatoes and tropical fruit while the bloody revolution raged outside in the streets.

Finally O'Neal and his chief engineer, Tom Johnston, were allowed to return to the dredge and go aboard. What they saw shocked them. The Manhattan was a shambles. Gunfire had knocked out the searchlights. Her launches were riddled with holes. Small arms fire had punctured her stern gas tanks.

Inside the stateroom O'Neal found an injured Thai crewman lying on his bunk wrapped in bloody bandages. Through the end of the bunk was a nasty bullet hole, right where he had been sitting before deciding to abandon ship. Worse, the American crew found all his

personal belongings missing; money, clothing, cigarets, binoculars, cameras, everything was gone.

He shrugged. He was still alive, after living through an amazing revolution from the very start. He sat down and laughed.

Then, almost as suddenly as it had started, the revolt ended. The score: numerous casualties, one shot-up dredge and a thoroughly disgusted crew. But Siamese hospitality quickly made up for that. Prime Minister Pibulsonggram, released by his captors, turned up as natty as ever, promising full reimbursement for all lost property.

It took the crew another three weeks to put the Manhattan back in shape so she could go to work dredging out the channel for Bangkok's harbor. And then came a glorious farewell party at the Princess Hotel — courtesy of Pibulsonggram's grateful and apologetic government.

The Manhattan's crew flew home, arriving back in Philadelphia on November 5th. The revolution in Bangkok seemed like a strange dream, far away and long ago. But O'Neal still carries a souvenir that reminds him that it was for real and in deadly earnest. The spent bullet he dug from the head of his bunk.