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In the 1960s Anthony Poshepny was a CIA operative whose macabre Southeast Asian exploits drew comparisons with Col. Kurtz, the megalomaniacal anti-hero of *Apocalypse Now*

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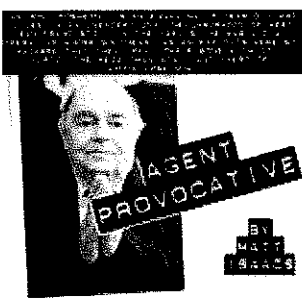
Though it is only 1 in the afternoon, the sky is already darkening under an approaching storm when the old man arrives at the hall. Wearing a baseball cap, tinted glasses, and a navy blue suit that stretches too tightly across his big shoulders, he walks slowly from the car, flanked by two beautiful women -- one his wife, the other his daughter -- gently guiding him down the sidewalk. He is in no hurry. Ever since his heart surgery, the man, once a star linebacker for St. Mary's College, has had trouble walking even a city block. But he wanted to make the journey from his home in the Sunset across the bridge to the Sportsmen Club in Richmond for this special occasion. He has come for a Lao wedding, but more important in his mind, he has come to see his people. He is recognized immediately upon entering the dimly lit hall. Men and women rush forward to greet him, some hugging him, others bowing respectfully, palms pressed together. A murmur travels through the crowd. A drum roll comes from the stage as a woman begins to sing a lilting Lao wedding song.

The old man waves to the friends he recognizes. The middle two fingers of his left hand are missing, blown away in an accident long ago. He raises his arms triumphantly as he moves through the crowd, a hero coming home. At 5 feet, 10 inches, and 200 pounds, he dwarfs most of the Lao people coming to greet him. His is one of the only white faces in the room.

He and his family take their seats at the end of a table laden with bowls upon bowls of food: noodles, ground pork, vegetable rolls, chicken feet, fermented hard-boiled eggs. As he eats, picking at the food with his fingers, a steady procession of people approaches him to pay respects. The bride, not yet 18 years of age, offers him a tiny glass of tea; the groom gives him two Newport cigarettes.

Few of the young people recognize the old white man, but their parents know him well. Thirty years ago, he taught many of them how to aim a recoilless rifle, how to set a booby trap with a hand grenade, how to fire a 4.2-inch mortar. He taught a lucky few how to fly; as if by magic, he literally summoned shipments of rice and American dollars from the heavens.

"He was our leader," says Yaochiam Chaophauh, who at 16 years of age fought

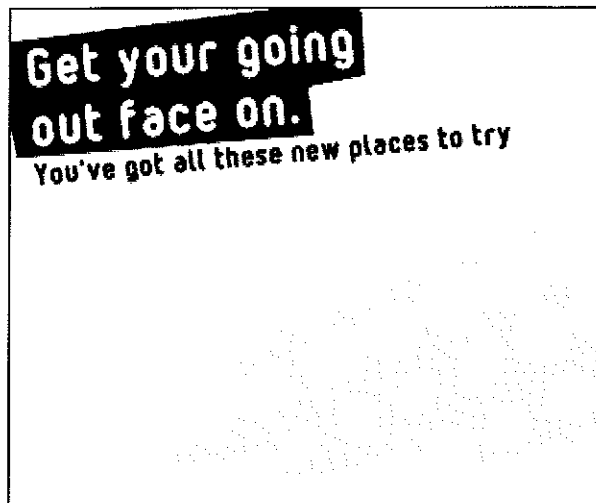


Anthony Pidgeon



Anthony Poshepny

Courtesy of Anthony



Poshepny



Anthony Poshepny.

Courtesy of Anthony Poshepny



After graduating from San Jose State, Poshepny joined the CIA

Anthony Pidgeon



Poshepny at a reunion with "his people."

Courtesy of Anthony Poshepny



Poshepny (right) with his brother

Anthony Pidgeon

in the old man's army against the North Vietnamese. "He paid our salaries. He paid for our clothes and for our guns. And when one of our people passed from life, he paid [the surviving family] for that life."

Anthony Poshepny, or Tony Poe as he is called by his friends, doesn't attract much attention in his neighborhood, just north of Stern Grove, probably because he doesn't get out much anymore, and when he does, he doesn't do anything that would be considered out of the ordinary for an ailing septuagenarian. The 75-year-old with the round, bald head can sometimes be seen shuffling out in his slippers and a Planet Hollywood sweat shirt to get the mail. On the day after Halloween, he was still giving away candy to the neighbor's kids.

Within certain circles, though, Poshepny has become an underground legend. War buffs know him as the Central Intelligence Agency's super-fighting machine, the man who, along with a few other spooks, played a key role in the United States' secret war in Laos throughout the 1960s. Others, mostly writers for the British tabloids, believe Poshepny was the actual model for Col. Kurtz, the megalomaniac Green Beret played by Marlon Brando in Francis Ford Coppola's film classic *Apocalypse Now*.

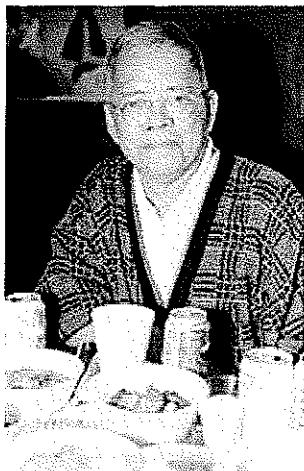
The film, released 20 years ago, tells the story of a mercenary's journey to assassinate a colonel who has gone

mad. Based on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Coppola's version shifts the setting from equatorial Africa to Vietnam, and focuses its attention on the skewed morals of war. Capt. Willard, played by Martin Sheen, travels up the Nung River, to "terminate the command" of Col. Kurtz, an officer who has surrendered to the wild instincts of the jungle and begun "operating without any human restraint, totally beyond the pale of any acceptable human conduct."

Like Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*, Poshepny, who spent more than a decade in the jungle, adopted the ways of the native people. Like Kurtz, he gathered a loyal following in a remote outpost in Southeast Asia, where, according to Poshepny, he was revered like a god. Like Kurtz, he had a taste for the macabre; he was famous for keeping the heads of his enemies in formaldehyde and sending the ears to his superiors with his embassy reports. And like Kurtz, Poshepny ultimately became a liability for the United States government.

Coppola denies that he and screenwriter John Milius had Poshepny in mind when they wrote the script. In a recent interview, Coppola said Brando's character was based loosely on Col. Robert Rheault, the commanding officer of all Green Berets in Vietnam, who in 1969 was court-martialed by the U.S. Army after some of his men were accused of killing a Vietnamese guide whom they believed was a double agent. The charges were later dropped, but only after Rheault's military career was ruined.

The case was widely publicized in *The New York Times*, and Coppola makes a few obvious references to it in the movie. Capt. Willard, played by Martin Sheen, receives confidential orders to take out the colonel after the Pentagon has gotten word that Kurtz has executed four Vietnamese double agents.



Wern Chen



Yaochiam Chaophaui

Courtesy of Anthony
Poshepny



Poshepny never wanted to leave
Southeast Asia

But the parallels between Col. Rheault and Kurtz stop there. Unlike Kurtz, Rheault had a reputation as a straight arrow; he never went "bamboo," or rebelled against the U.S. government.

Poshepny, on the other hand, achieved an almost mythic, Kurtz-like reputation during the Vietnam War, often being viewed by superiors as a renegade warrior whose primordial instincts conflicted with modern morality. Some of those who knew Poshepny during the war and have since seen *Apocalypse Now* say Tony Poe was the real Col. Kurtz. And if he wasn't, they say, he should have been. Because Poshepny's story is far stranger than anything Coppola could have made up.

Poshepny likes to say he was too fast, too tough, too wild for death to ever bring him down. "Every time I was injured, I'd look up at the sky and say, 'Hey, Jesus, you want me now?' And Jesus would say, 'No, Tony. We've got a lot of girls up here, and you've got a bad reputation.'"

Poshepny's earliest brush with death came when he was 8 years old and living on a farm in Santa Rosa; his brother accidentally shot him in the stomach with a .22 rifle. The boy would have died if it were not for a blood transfusion from his father who, luckily, had the same blood type. Tony's father, John Charles Poshepny, was a Navy commander and one of Tony's biggest heroes. "He was the toughest son of a bitch around. To me he was the highest symbol of excellence," Poshepny says.

During World War II, John Poshepny was stationed on the battleship *USS Utah* and narrowly avoided death himself when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. The *Utah* was one of the ships that was sunk in the bombing, but at the time the senior Poshepny happened to be on the island on his way back to the ship.

Though he was only 15, the young Poshepny immediately tried to join the armed forces but wasn't allowed to enlist until his mother gave her official consent a year later. "I couldn't wait to start shooting those Japs," he says. Poshepny says he was sent to Iwo Jima with an elite parachute battalion. He was hit twice during his tour, once by machine gun fire and another by shrapnel. When the war ended, he was given two Purple Hearts for his service; he now displays them with dozens of other medals in his living room.

After the war, Poshepny went to college on the GI Bill, first at St. Mary's in Moraga, then graduated from San Jose State with degrees in English and history. Following college, he was one of the first recruits of the fledgling CIA in 1952.

On a recent stopover on his way home to Bangkok, Jack Shirley, one of Poshepny's classmates in CIA training, sat down to talk about their early years on "The Farm," the agency's fabled training center at Camp Peary, Va. Shirley and Poshepny were in the class of '52 and went on to work together off and on in Asia for much of the rest of their lives. Back then, Shirley says, the agency was filled with aging World War II veterans and was looking for young men who had a few years of military experience, a college education, and an athletic background. Both Shirley and Poshepny fit the mold, and were among approximately 30 men chosen from hundreds of applicants.

Tony Poe stories are legion, predating his wartime activities by years, and Shirley loves to tell them. For

example, he says, before graduation from the Farm, Poe was called in for a psychological evaluation. As part of the examination, the story goes, the doctor asked Poe to compose a one-act play, and then perform it. The doctor left for 20 minutes, and when he returned, Poe was sitting behind the doctor's desk, and from this vantage point began screaming at him, calling him a "Communist penetration" and a "parlor pink." Poe then opened the desk drawer and pulled out a pair of pink panties, which he threw in the doctor's face, threatening to have the doctor fired from the agency.

"Tony had talked the secretary into giving him her underpants," Shirley says. "How is the outfit going to turn away a guy who can come up with something like that?"

Poshepny's old friends never tire of unearthing Tony Poe chestnuts, like the time he carried on a conversation at a Bangkok bar in a level voice, while underneath the table he was strangling a cat. (The reason he had his hands around the kitty's neck was not made clear.) Or the time in Thailand when he was recuperating at a Mormon hospital, after his back had been lacerated by the explosion of a Bouncing Betty, a type of land mine that, when stepped on, "bounces" to chest level before exploding. Even though his back was covered with stitches, his friends sent him a prostitute who carried a sack of oranges that held a bottle of vodka at the bottom. They say administrators kicked Poshepny out of the hospital, even though his exertions with the prostitute had ripped open all the stitching on his back.

Tony Poe stories have, no doubt, been embellished over the years. Perhaps greatly. The man was an epic drinker, and he acknowledges that the only thing he liked better than telling stories was killing Commies. But the story of the CIA's role in Laos, including Poshepny's dealings there, has been soberly detailed in a book by Roger Warner called *Back Fire*, winner of the 1995 Book of the Year Award from the Overseas Press Club, a New York-based group of foreign correspondents. According to Warner's account, after Poshepny joined the CIA, he became involved in a number of operations throughout Asia, mostly encouraging rebellions against China's Communist regime. In his first years he worked with the Khamba tribesmen of Tibet in their resistance against the Chinese invasion of their country. He was later involved in a failed attempt to cause an uprising on the island of Sumatra in 1958. On these missions, Poshepny's role was to provide a rebellious spark; the native people did the rest.

"Most people don't realize, the CIA was created to do the things the country couldn't do out in the open," says Shirley. "Nothing we did was legal. Everything we did was illegal. 'Plausible deniability' was the name of the game."

After their defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the French cleared out of all of Indochina, including Laos; the U.S. was eager to fill the resulting political vacuum, to keep Communists from stepping in. In 1961, Poshepny was dropped into Laos near the border to Thailand, along with a couple of other CIA operatives, including Shirley. Their mission, called Operation Momentum, involved the quiet training of a tribe of hill people called the Meo -- later called the Hmong -- to use modern-day weaponry against the Communist front in North Vietnam.

Operation Momentum expanded quickly until nearly 10,000 tribesmen were armed and ready. The tribesmen would make quick, guerrilla strikes on the North Vietnamese, blowing up a bridge here, booby-trapping a trail there, while the U.S. involvement was kept virtually invisible.

The Geneva Accords of 1962 only increased the CIA's clandestine activities, according to Warner's account. Under the accords, Laos was declared a neutral country, forcing North Vietnamese, Soviet, and American armed forces to officially leave the country. From then on, Laos was no man's land, while behind the scenes, the major military powers continued to play chess with each other, using the Lao people as pawns. In 1964, the CIA received its first confirmation that the Communists were using the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos to provide troops and supplies to South Vietnam. In March 1965, 3,500 U.S. Marines landed in South Vietnam; that number would grow to 184,000 soldiers by year's end.

Poshepny says he was living in North Laos in January of 1965 when he saw North Vietnamese soldiers advancing upon his training site and his home, a thatched hut that leaked during the monsoon season, when sheets of rain would turn the dirt floor into mud. The rainy season had ended, giving way to drier, foggy days, but there was still no running water, no electricity. He was subsisting on Spam, beans, and White Horse scotch. It was the day Lyndon Johnson was being sworn in as president, Poshepny recalls.

Poshepny says he was eating lunch when he saw the troops, "leapfrogging" in groups of twos and threes along the base's airplane landing strip. One group of North Vietnamese would get up and run, while the others would fire their guns to protect the advancing group.

Poshepny began firing at the soldiers with an M-1 carbine. He waited until he saw a soldier get up and then aimed for the head. "I kept hitting them as they got up, popping them in the head, until they stopped coming. Somebody looked through some binoculars and saw 17 bodies along the edge of the strip," he says.

Poshepny and a few of his troops went out to check the bodies for paperwork, when three soldiers hidden in the brush started firing at them. A bullet went into Poshepny's stomach and out his hip, knocking him to the ground. The three soldiers came out of the brush, firing at the rest of Poshepny's troops. As quickly as he could, Poshepny says, he lined up his grenades next to him on the ground, pulled the spoons, then began lobbing them in the direction of the North Vietnamese soldiers until all signs of human life were obliterated from the runway.

When Poshepny got up, he saw that the tribesmen who had followed him to the strip had been killed. He says he then walked back to the camp with half his hip gone, using his rifle as a cane. "When my people saw me coming out of the mist alive ... they were simply amazed," he says. "They thought I must have had some magic protecting me, so they all came up wanting to touch me. 'Stay close to Tony, he protect you,' they said."

As the war in Vietnam escalated, so did Poshepny's drinking, until, he says, he was downing a quart of *lao-lao*, the native whiskey, before breakfast. "I drank before I went out to kill," he says. "There's nothing wrong with that."

But the more Poshepny drank, the more of a nuisance he became to his superiors. And the more of a nuisance he became, the farther away his bosses told him to go, hoping to keep him out of trouble; eventually, the commando was pushed all the way to the China border. Poshepny was under strict orders not to engage in combat, but the farther away he went, the more belligerent he became.

After sacking one village, he says, he married the chieftain's daughter, giving the father a dowry of 100 water buffalo and 75 goats. "She had a terrific wiggle," he says with a grin. "Better still, she was Catholic." Poshepny may have been pleased, but his marriage was yet another violation of CIA rules, which forbid agents from becoming romantically involved with their "clients" for security reasons.

On the China border, Poshepny began training a new tribe, 10,000 people who then were called the Yao, and now are called the Mein. As the years passed, Poshepny's reputation as a maniacal, coldblooded killer grew among Americans familiar with his work, while among the tribes, he became respected as a leader who cared about his people. He says he took members of the Yao on airborne reconnaissance missions across the China border. When he ran low on ammunition, he put grenades in glass jars, pulled the spoons, and dropped them from the helicopter. When he ran out of grenades, he says, he dropped smooth, round river stones, which could smash straight through the roof of a jeep.

Poshepny stories are changeable, and he has changed them from time to time in regard to the collection and dissemination of human body parts. He admits that he collected ears, a practice he kept from his days on Iwo Jima. Heads are a different matter. Sometimes he says he kept the heads of his enemies in

formaldehyde; other times he says he put them on stakes, according to local customs, and let the tribespeople throw pebbles at them. Yet other times, he says he dropped them from his helicopter like the round river stones.

"Keep in mind that Tony has a grisly sense of humor," Shirley says. "He once said he was collecting heads for humanitarian reasons. He had been paying a bounty for ears, until he ran into a little boy with his ears missing. The boy said his father had cut them off and sold them. Tony was so shocked, he gave the boy a few hundred kip, and immediately decided he would accept only heads from then on."

It is at this point in the story when the legend of Poshepny and the legend of Kurtz begin to diverge. In *Apocalypse Now*, Kurtz became estranged from the U.S. government, turning inward as he succumbed to the animal instincts of the jungle. Poshepny surrendered to his wild instincts as well, particularly to his thirst for lao-lao. But unlike Kurtz, Poshepny did not turn inward. In fact, he did not change much from his brutish youth; rather, the mind-set of his country changed. As the Vietnam War dragged on, the Tony Poes, once revered as American heroes, were reduced to bloodthirsty barbarians in their home country's eyes.

In 1975, Poshepny and 800 other CIA operatives in Asia were released from duty. "They kicked us out because they said we were an embarrassment," Poshepny says, still baffled by the turn of events. "We were the ones who won the goddamn war against communism."

Poshepny is still shocked by how he heard America received its veterans, how Gen. William Westmoreland, the overall U.S. commander in South Vietnam, called the war a mistake. "And 200,000 young men burning their draft cards?" he asks with scorn. "Jane Fonda, that bitch, daring to question John McCain? I wish I had been in the country when those college kids were protesting at Sather Gate. I woulda gone down there and beat the shit out of them."

Despite Poshepny's bitterness toward his country's withdrawal of support, even he says he needed the rest. When the CIA cut its agents loose, Poshepny had already served 30 years, the magic number for a fat military pension. He retired to a tapioca farm in Thailand. For the first time in his life he spent time with his wife, his son, and his two daughters. He was still beloved by the Yao people, who lived not far away in Laos. Over time he mellowed, only occasionally finishing off a quart of scotch and swaggering down the streets of Udorn with a loaded .45 Magnum in his belt. In 1980 he was diagnosed with diabetes and drastically cut back his drinking. He returned to San Francisco in 1992 on a temporary visit; the visit became permanent.

Tony Poe had lived to see another day.

"When reporters talk to my father, they write down the silly things he says," Maria Poshepny, Tony Poe's eldest daughter, says at the wedding. "They don't appreciate the fact that he stayed with his people. He took care of them. He didn't just rape the land and leave, like so many others. He didn't just impregnate my mother and fly home. He took her with him."

As she says this, Maria eyes her father suspiciously. Although he had triple bypass heart surgery just last year, throughout the day, his friends have been covertly pouring cognac into his Diet Pepsi. He has grown warm and bolder, beckoning those around him for more. Next to Poshepny sits Wern Chen, his No. 1 lieutenant in the Yao tribe. I ask the solemn man to describe Poshepny's connection with the Yao people, but before Chen can answer, Poshepny silences him. "*Farang*," Poshepny says, using a derogatory word for foreigner and pointing to me. All the men laugh. I don't get an answer, and soon Poshepny unceremoniously leaves the celebration, steps into the rain now coming down in sheets, and heads home to the Sunset.