

History of Asian Biomedicine**Einar Ammundsen, MD (1911-1999): Danish World War II hero and famous Bangkok family physician**

Einar Ammundsen was a most respected figure in Bangkok and a pillar of the Scandinavian and expatriate communities. He directed the Bangkok Nursing Home, a small private hospital founded in 1897 as a nonprofit foundation. It served the middle class Thai, diplomatic, and expatriate communities and was widely recognized in southeast Asia as a hospital with outstanding nursing and medical care. Patients from neighboring countries came here when seriously ill and this institution became the first regionally popular one and helped to start “medical tourism” in Bangkok some four decades ago. The old tropical designed Bangkok Nursing Home closed doors in 1996 with construction of the large and modern private Bangkok Nursing Home (BNH) Hospital next door. Such highly respected expatriate doctors as Egon and Gerta Ettinger, Colin Brittain, Peter Comer, and Patrick Dixon had their full-time general practice there. They used Thai specialist consultants, mostly faculty from Bangkok medical colleges. Einar was the medical director of the BNH and supervised the laboratory as well as practiced general medicine, obstetrics, and even some basic surgery. He was a rock of a man yet he radiated humanity. Einar was greatly respected by his peers and was also noted for his life-long motivation to stay up to date by reading journals and regular participation in medical conferences in Thailand and abroad. His name or a pseudonym appears in several published Bangkok biographies and also in novels about life in Thailand of past years.

Einar was born in Denmark as the son of a protestant bishop, went to medical college and graduated at the beginning of World War II. Along with other students and young citizens, he soon got into serious trouble with the German security services (SD and Gestapo). He became an active member of the resistance movement which was supported from England by the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS). Einar started out as the assistant editor of the underground “White Paper” and later a senior member of the “Tostrup Group” of resistance fighters. He soon

got onto the Gestapo’s (Nazi secret police) most wanted list and survived by changing identities and often living in the woods and hiding places. To make himself look older, he grew a small beard and had his scalp X-ray irradiated to make him bald (this later led to many skin cancers that were removed regularly when he became older). His main duties in the “underground” were to collect weapons dropped by airplane from England at night. This was relatively easy as Denmark was largely an agricultural country with many fields and forests. It was probably more dangerous for the low flying British pilots who had to find the dropping spots in the dark without radar or today’s electronics. To get the dropped arms and other supplies safely to hiding and distribution places without being shot by the Germans was another problem. He survived several close scraps and even “shoot-outs”. BBC interviewed him soon after the war when he was already in Bangkok and had been highly decorated by Denmark and Great Britain. Here is an abridged summary of a typical night collection trip from an old interview on BBC:

It is a summer night in 1944. Fourteen young men come on bicycles one by one from different directions to a field near Holstebro, Denmark. They were waiting to receive a night time gift from the Royal Airforce. Einar (code name Bloch) is one of them. 24-year old Willy Jensen is the leader. All except one are already on the SD and GESTAPO wanted list and in hiding. Four members are the signal team armed with powerful flashlights and a sten gun. They will mark the drop zone when they hear the aircraft which is to carry small arms and ammunition. Minutes pass and no plane. Perhaps the low flying pilot got shot down on his way across the North Sea. The distinctive sound of the Westland Lysander MKII airplane (different from the German ones) is finally heard. The 15th member, Arne, of the team has the truck to drive the arms to hiding places, is not here yet. Big worry. What will we do with the arms? There are finally sounds in the brush. It is very dark and the 25 year old friend is stumbling, fell to the ground and finds himself with a pistol in his neck and unable to recall the password. He is nevertheless identified and just at the right time, with his essential truck and the most dangerous

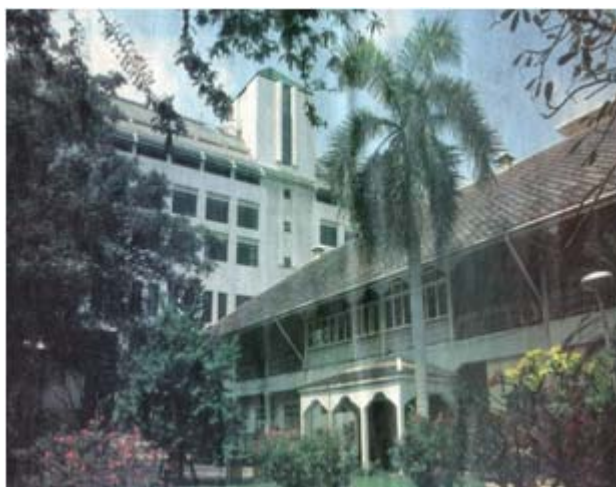
Correspondence to: Patcharee Malawong, Department of Surgery, Frederiksberg Hospital, Copenhagen 2000, Denmark. E-mail: P_malawong@yahoo.com

assignment of them all. He is the only member who still lives outside the underground without a reward on his head. The drop comes off well and all parachutes are accounted for. A surprise is two parachutes with two agents from London. One is hung up in a tree and has to be retrieved. They also carry mail and sweets from England. The parachutes are disposed of, all evidence is removed and the risky transport of the weapons to hiding and distribution places goes off without incidents. The crew disperses to their "normal life" for Arne, and into hiding for the others. More than 6,000 containers with weapons and explosives for the resistance fighters were dropped into Denmark during the war. Not all such deliveries went off so well. One team had been captured and executed by the Germans shortly before this happening.

Jim Thompson, the Thai Silk King, vanished in the Cameron Highlands of Malaysia during a vacation trip in Pahang. His disappearance was never explained and the subject of many unsubstantiated tales. Einar, his close friend and personal physician, was in the holiday party at the hillside resort and the first to raise the alarm and help organize search parties when Thompson did not return from a morning hike. Many years later, when interviewed, he expressed his view that a tiger attack (they were still found in the Highlands at that time) was one possibility. He did not consider foul play seriously even though there were many rumors attributing to revenge killing due to the fact that Thomson served as an OSS officer (predecessor of the CIA) during World War II.

The BNH was founded in 1898 by a combined action of the British Consul General, expatriate "Taipans", Thai High Society, and HM King Chulalongkorn who donated the land and granted his support. It operated as a nonprofit corporation and was able to stay open throughout World War II and the Japanese occupation. An expatriate German was then the director. It closed in 1996 when it was no longer practical to have such a small 55 bed tropical nursing home cope with modern 5-star proprietary hospitals full of the latest instrumentation and diagnostic equipment. As a nonprofit institution managed by a volunteer board, it had a policy of looking after virtually any patient whether able or not to pay his bill. They ranged from expatriates to low budget tourists from foreign lands. Sick diplomats and others from India, Nepal, and other Asian countries came to the BNH when in need. Einar was probably one of the largest contributors to the huge outstanding bill list, as he never turned down a sick patient.

It was 1995 when his heavy smoking habit caught up with him and he was found to have lung cancer. This led him to close his still very active practice which caused much sadness among his large long term patients and colleagues. He and his wife Anne Kirsten packed and left for Denmark where, 4 years later, he passed away in 1999. The Danish Television System still managed to produce a one hour film about his life and accomplishments. He led a life of great service to Denmark as well as to medicine in Bangkok. In some ways, one can call him a pioneer in helping establish Bangkok as a regional medical center that it is today.



Left: Einar and Anne Kirsten in their home at Bangkok about 1994. **Right:** The historical Bangkok Nursing Home (front) with new BNH Hospital in background.