



Collecting corpses at Chiang Mai central prison.

Ruam Jai – The Heart Collectors

By Alan Surrey

Photographs by John Hulme

Documentary photographer John Hulme had just completed his first day with the Ruam Jai Rescue Squad in Chiang Mai, He was emotionally drained. What had been a 'normal' day for Jaere and Chavalit, the Ruam Jai team on duty that day, left John reflecting on the apparent randomness of death, the senseless waste of unfulfilled potential caused by a momentary act of rage. It was rare for him to be haunted by the images he captured.

The Ruam Jai or Heart Collectors, is a Buddhist, charity organization that provide emergency medical services throughout Thailand. Their speeding vehicles are a familiar sight on Thailand's highways were on average, between 35-40 people are killed every day - and that statistic does not include victims who die after they have been removed from the scene of the accident. The carnage on Thailand's roads cost the country nearly 2.1 % of GDP.

John's first day with the Ruam Jai began routinely with a visit to Chiang Mai's central prison. Two inmates both in their 30s had died during the night. Cause of death – HIV/AIDS. The bodies were wrapped in shrouds and delivered to a local temple. The Ruam Jai also provide coffins and funeral rites free of charge to those unable to afford the cost of the traditional, *suad sop* – prayers for the dead.

The Ruam Jai team constantly monitor police communications on a short-wave radio and it wasn't long before

cold drinks and cigarettes were hastily discarded and John found himself speeding through traffic at speeds over 100 kilometers an hour towards Chiang Mai's airport. A light aircraft had clipped a pylon on its landing approach. Wreckage and body parts were strewn across a road just short of the runway. The area was cordoned off for hours as Firemen hosed down the crash site. High octane fuel tinged red with blood ran into the city's sewers.

Later the team answered a call which took them to the moat which surrounds the ancient city of Chiang Mai. A young man's body was hauled out of the murky waters. He was just a kid" said John. "They told me he had probably been drinking heavily the night before, wandered too close to the edge and...." Cause of death – drowning. Handling the dead in Thailand takes courage. The fear of ghosts is very real.

By mid-afternoon, John and the Ruam Jai team were at the scene of a murder investigation. An elderly woman had been found dead in ramshackle lodgings. The room was in disarray and showed obvious signs of a struggle. "As part of the Ruam Jai team my presence was never questioned by authorities" recalls John. "I was given open access to a crime scene." A suspect quickly emerged – an elderly man living in a room close by. When questioned by police, he confessed to drinking with the woman, an argument over money and then a blur. Cause of death – strangulation.

John had shot some disturbing images during the day, seen a side of life in Chiang Mai no tourist ever sees or wants to for that matter. He was

looking forward to a night in the darkroom developing film though also beginning to question the efficacy of the project - and then as darkness fell, another call for help.

The Ruam Jai team raced out to a deserted location a few kilometers outside of the city. Police vehicles were already at the scene. John followed Jaere and Chavalit through thick undergrowth not knowing what to expect. They came to a small clearing which had been illuminated by arc lights. John was shocked by what he saw. An 18 year old woman was hanging by the neck from a tree, her natural beauty apparent even in death.

That afternoon she had confronted her boyfriend with suspicions about his interest in another woman. They had argued and she had committed the senseless act of self-harm in a momentary fit of jealous rage.



I met John in a bar in Chiang Mai immediately after. He was visibly shaken. He told me in graphic detail what he had witnessed on his first day with the Ruam Jai. As if on cue, the Ruam Jai vehicle sped past, red lights flashing. John watched the vehicle disappear in traffic and then said "A day in the life of death."

See www.johnhulme.net