

# Lawyer in the 'eye of the hurricane'

The head of Thailand's oldest and biggest independent law firm, David Lyman has found peace and serenity in his adopted home

As a youngster, David Lyman didn't want to become a lawyer as his parents and many of his relatives were. Instead he joined the US Navy, but couldn't escape his destiny. While debating whether or not to stay in the Navy, he decided to try studying law, and said to himself after the end of the first semester: "This is what I really want to do!" Four decades later he can still say, "I never regretted it."

Mr. Lyman is now Chairman and Chief Values Officer of Tilleke & Gibbins International Ltd., which is the oldest and biggest independent law firm in Thailand. With 265 employees, the company serves more than 5,000 corporate and business clients from over 100 countries. The clients include national government agencies, banks, airlines, shipping companies and fashion houses.

"The company was established in 1890 by a Ceylonese, Mr. William Alfred Tilleke. It was bought by my father in 1951 and I took over after his death in 1984," Mr. Lyman said.

"I came to Thailand for the first time with my parents in 1949, when I was 12 years old. They had decided to live here for good because it was a very friendly place — as it still is today — in comparison with other countries in the region at that time, when wars of independence raged in many nations around Thailand."

"My father compared Thailand to the 'eye of the hurricane' because the eye is always calm, sunny, no wind blowing while the storm rages all around. Thailand is still a land of calm and sun," Mr. Lyman said.

"Of course," he continued "I know what is happening in the South and so on, but generally speaking the Thais are a quite accepting and open society."

"They are open to new ideas. I have learned how to appreciate their culture and how to function within it, just as my parents did. I have also adopted the 'Thai way' of doing things. I try to live by a code of ethics, stay out of local politics, be honest, work hard and do my best to understand how the system works, because you have to work within the system. And that's how we have developed a world-wide reputation."

David's parents made substantial contributions to the Kingdom. Mr. Albert Lyman was a founder of the American Association of Thailand (now the American Chamber of Commerce) and also

a founder and chairman of the Bangkok Stock Exchange (now the Stock Exchange of Thailand). Mrs. Freda Lyman received the Most Noble Order of the Crown of Thailand 5th Class in 1961 for her work with the Foundation for Crippled Children and was the first foreign woman to be decorated by His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

"We have had a good relationship with virtually every government because we don't involve ourselves with political matters," Mr. Lyman said. "Of course we have to understand the political situation and to know the politicians. I have known some of them since we were all young. We grew up together."

"I am not concerned about 'good or bad' government. All my concern is that this country must develop. The Thai people want to see it develop. There's a saying that 'Thailand succeeds despite governments'. It succeeds because of the nature of its people and their culture. And as I said, it is the 'eye of the hurricane'. It has a peace and serenity that you can't find anywhere else in Asia."

Business-wise, Mr. Lyman said that there was not much competition here until 1965. "Now, there are a lot of foreign-owned or foreign-oriented firms as well as the Thai lawyers who were trained in Thailand or overseas, and lawyers who left their firms and established themselves here. There are fine lawyers in this country. Good client service is a key to a successful practice. Many law firms can do the same things we do, and we can do the same things they do," Mr. Lyman stressed.

## Thailand changes you

"It is true that the Thai people want to combine work with pleasure. Why should you do business and work hard all your life if you don't enjoy what you do? But on the other hand, you can't live only for pleasure as you will give back nothing to society," said Mr. Lyman.

"There's a growing middle class in Thailand and this has been going on since the 1960s. The strength of Thai society is in the women. They are the real power in this country and you can rely on them. They know more and they are more reliable than men. And if you look at my website, you will see that most of my employees are women."

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can change Thailand will be very disappointed. Thailand changes you! Thais have a nice and slow way in doing things. We westerners tend to want instantaneous results, pleasure and service. Everything has to be done immediately. The Thai way is to take the middle path, take life a little easier. It is a Buddhist and also a Hindu philosophy. I find it compatible with my character. When I came here I was also too demanding, impatient and shouted a lot. But I have mellowed, as do many people, especially when they get older," Mr. Lyman admitted.

"My first question to a foreigner who wants to open a business in Thailand is: 'Have you done it anywhere else?' If they have then they should understand the difficulties of a foreigner doing business in a foreign environment. If they never have done business in a foreign environment before then I will tell them: 'Don't start in Thailand, go somewhere else first.' But they usually never listen," Mr. Lyman pointed out.

"Anyway, in the initial stage we will try to help them to overcome all the obstacles, and there are many to overcome. We'll teach them what can or cannot be done here. Sometimes we have to also teach them what can or cannot be done in their own home countries."

"They have a perception that by leaving their home country with all its laws and regulations and going somewhere else, like to Thailand, they are free to do whatever they want. This is not true and not the reality. Sometimes, I will tell them: 'Expect more difficulties here than in your home country.'" He added that a few, of course, have never even had a business in their home country before.

"How can we compete with the other law firms here? Some people say that we are more expensive, some say we are cheaper. Client service seems to be the key. We serve as a bridge between the foreign and Thai communities. We understand what the foreigner wants and how the foreigner thinks. They don't all want the same thing and think the same way. As they don't, so we try to be more flexible."

Mr. Lyman stressed that to do business is a lot

of sweat no matter where you are, you have to have luck and very often you need a good partner. "But to find one, as I have learned many years ago, is much more difficult than to find a good spouse, whether you are in China, Malaysia, the United States or Thailand," he said.

"Having worked for the past 48 years, since I graduated from university, I would like to have a kind of 'retirement', but I have to do it in steps. First, I have to slow down. But if you retire then you have to find something to do. And it happens that I love what I do now and so far everybody around me wants to keep me around as well. There are times when I want to go and they will say 'no, please don't'. My mother and my father worked virtually until they died," David said.

Anyway, if it happens one day that he retires: "I will scuba dive with my wife, Khun Poo, do photography, spend more time with my textile and carpet collections and our elephants, read more and correspond with the friends I have all over the world."

But above all, he will focus on the environment, because that's where his main interest lies. "I don't like pollution or what is happening to the forests and wildlife. I support the preservation of wildlife," Mr. Lyman emphasised.

Who will take over the business one day? "Well, this is the problem and the biggest, most immediate goal — to find that person or persons," he admitted. "It should be somebody with the same mindset and with the same vision as I have and to find someone like that is not going to be easy. I have been searching for that someone for the past 9 years!"

"It takes many, many years to build a good, solid reputation and only a few seconds to destroy it. My parents, our partners, and colleagues and staff and I have worked very hard to establish the company's reputation and it is my desire to see the firm continue on. But, of course, not everything always runs as smoothly as I would like, because if it was like that then I wouldn't have a job," he acknowledged.

"Being born and having lived in the US and for

many years in Thailand, I have my feet in both countries. I am too Thai to be an American, and too American to be a Thai. When a westerner lives in Asia, he or she either loves it or hates it. There is no middle ground. I personally love Asia. I am comfortable here and people are comfortable with me. Thailand has been very good to my parents, to my family and to me," Mr. Lyman said.

"I will never, ever move to any other country. Heaven's no! You can't find a better country to live in than Thailand," Mr. Lyman concluded.

## BioDATA

Mr. David Lyman was born on September 25, 1936 in Washington, DC, USA.

He attended pre-secondary and secondary schools in the United States, Korea, Japan, Thailand, India, and Switzerland during 1941-1954.

He graduated with a Bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from Duke University in North Carolina in 1958 and entered the US Navy serving on minesweepers (1958-59) and in submarines (1960-67). He was a naval reservist for 14 years with the rank of lieutenant-commander.

He resumed his studies at Hastings College of Law in San Francisco, and became a Juris Doctor in 1965, a member of the California Bar Association and a practicing attorney at Fitzsimmons & Petris, then Lempres & Seyranian law firms in Oakland until 1967.

Mr. Lyman was a Senior Partner of Tilleke & Gibbins ROP in Thailand from 1967 until 2000, Director and Senior Partner of Tilleke & Gibbins International Ltd until 2003 and then became Chairman and Senior Partner of the firm.

From 2004 he has been Chairman and Chief Values Officer of the company.

Mr. Lyman has been active in the business and civic community circles in Thailand and abroad.

His wife is Thassaneeya (Poo) Pimpila. They have no children.