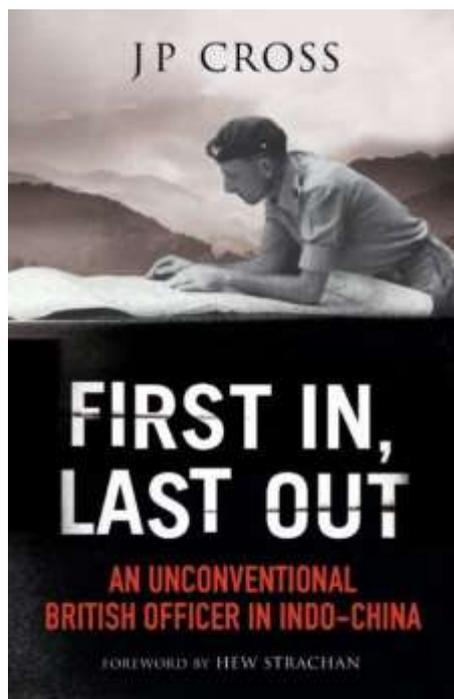


## First In, Last Out - An Unconventional British Officer in Indo-China

By J P Cross.



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Foreword by Hew Strachan

### Highlights

- Unique memoir from a largely forgotten conflict
- Personal account that details both counter-insurgency action and high political manoeuvring
- Written by a critically-acclaimed author, formerly official historian to the Royal Nepalese Army

**Description.** This is the astonishing tale of two episodes in the life of Colonel J P Cross, jungle Fighter and linguist extraordinaire.

As a young officer at the end of the war against Japan in 1945, he took part in counterinsurgency operations against the Vietminh at a time of chaos and confusion. Sent to the area to help disarm the defeated Japanese, Cross found himself commanding a battalion of the very same troops against the Vietminh. That period provides the backdrop to Cross's experiences as British

Defence Attaché to Laos between 1972 and 1976. His mastery of the languages of the region allowed him rarely accorded access to high Laotian political circles. Allowed to wander at will even by the Communists, he was in the unique position to survey the subterfuge and rivalry surrounding an overlooked yet fascinating sideshow to the Vietnam War.

A remarkable man, J P Cross provides an absorbing account of his life amidst the cut and thrust of Laotian politics.

### Author Details

In 1970, *The Economist* described J P Cross as 'one of those gifted, dedicated eccentrics that the British Army has the habit of spawning.' In his career spanning 40 years, Colonel Cross commanded a rifle company during the Malayan Emergency and the Border Scouts in Borneo, directed the British Army Jungle Warfare School and recruited Gurkhas for the British Army in Nepal. Hew Strachan is Professor of International Relations at the University of St Andrews and was formerly the Chichele Professor of the History of War at All Souls College, Oxford.

Review by Simon Hutchinson

**Forward** by Sir Hew Strachan (former Chichele Professor of the History of War, All Souls College, Oxford).

Britain's Brigade of Gurkhas is a survivor of empire. The Gurkhas were raised for imperial service and formed part of the Indian, not the British, army. In 1947, on India's independence, they should have stayed in the service of India. Six of the ten regiments, including the most senior, the 1<sup>st</sup> Gurkha Rifles, whom John Cross joined as a young subaltern at the end of the Second World War, did so. The four that did not, deprived of their bases in India, adopted a peripatetic life as Britain withdrew from its colonies, including by 1971 all those east of Suez. John Cross's career was shaped by this experience. He became an expert in low intensity conflict, and predominantly in jungle warfare, fighting insurgents in Malaya and Borneo, but – on his own admission - acquiring no experience of the sorts of European conventional warfare preached, but fortunately never practised, by the British Army of the Rhine.

John Cross has written of those battles elsewhere. *First in, last out* is not an account of the last of Britain's imperial wars. Its focus is Indo-China. Although part of the French empire, it was here

that John Cross experienced combat in 1945 and it was here, not in Malaya or Borneo, that he saw Communism triumph in 1975. Japan's rapid victory in Malaya, culminating in the fall of Singapore, in February 1942, shattered Britain's hegemony, but did not necessarily rob it of all moral authority. Britain had at least fought the Japanese, however ineptly, and it had then supported the resistance to Japanese occupation. Ultimately it regained its lost territories by force of arms. France did none of these things. It colluded in Japan's occupation of what is today Vietnam, and in doing so undermined France's hold on government even more surely than if it had directly opposed Japan and been defeated. The Vichy government, having surrendered to the Axis in 1940, ended up on the wrong side in 1945, damned at home by its collaboration with Germany and in south-east Asia by its acquiescence in an occupation that was exploitative and brutal.

Communism provided much of the intellectual and organisational direction to the resistance against Japan. In China itself, the Communists fought alongside the nationalists to eject the Japanese, but then drove the former off the mainland in the civil war that followed. Similarly, albeit at much smaller scale, they provided the local resistance to the Japanese occupation of both Malaya and Indo-China. In the wars after the Second World War, the British defeated the Communists in Malaya, and so were able to hand over power on their own terms. The French did not. At the very end of the war, the Japanese overthrew the French, just before Japan itself admitted defeat. When John Cross and the Gurkhas arrived in what was then called Cochin China, they found a power vacuum. The opening chapters of *First in, last out* are a forceful evocation of the power vacuum which war can create. This was a story that would end for France in surrender at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and for the west more broadly with the fall of Saigon in 1975.

It is one of French and American defeats. John Cross is no friend of France, at least as a colonial power: he shows the French as unable to engage with the language and culture of those they ruled, and as arrogant and violent in their responses. His relationship with the United States, the principal external player in the bulk of this book, was more confused. Harold Wilson's Britain refused to fight in Vietnam: it was not the slavish ally of Washington that Tony Blair's would become in 2002-3. When John Cross arrived in Laos as the British Defence Attaché in 1972, his immediate superior, the British Ambassador, opposed America's policy in Indo-China and was appalled by the destructiveness of its bombing of

North Vietnam. Laos itself, used by the North as a conduit to the South, was not immune from the effects. The ambassador, to whom the defence attaché was bound to show loyalty, made no secret of his views. John Cross himself had spent over twenty years, half of them in the jungle, fighting revolutionary Communism, and training not just the British army, but also those of Thailand and South Vietnam (among others), to do so. He was therefore committed to US policy, even if he often found himself at odds with its execution.

Laos was fighting two wars simultaneously, as was Vietnam, and both had been doing so with varying degrees of intensity since the end of the Second World War. One was a civil war between the Communists and the forces of the right (in Laos, royalists); the other was what has been called the 'global Cold War', with the United States ranged against the Soviet Union and China, the two major Communist powers, in a struggle for regional and wider hegemony. Both wars can now look dated. John Cross's descriptions of court life in Laos, while charming and engaging, also smack of the corruption and backwardness which would indeed make the victory of the labouring classes 'inevitable' (to invoke the vocabulary of Marxism). And yet the dirigisme of Communism was itself shattered in Europe within a decade and a half. For readers in the 'west', it is important to remember that the global Cold War did not end in 1989-90, as the European Cold War did. Much that is discussed here resonates: the use of proxies by major powers; the incapacity of those proxies or, conversely, their ability to apply the resources granted them for objectives other than those for which they were designed by the donor power; and the persistent inability on the part of all actors to coordinate their military actions with their long-term policy objectives.

This was war at a very different level from that to which John Cross was accustomed. His skills in fighting the Communists were tactical, and his writing reflects his keenness to engage with the graduates of the Jungle Warfare School which he had directed. But he had also honed the diplomatic tools which he needed more often now that he was a servant of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. His facility with languages gave him an access to Lao institutions and individuals denied to his monoglot peers, and a value to London which was recognised by the unusual length of his tour. (There is a lesson here for Britain as it develops its practice of what it in 2017 it calls defence engagement.) Being a teetotaler may have made the heavy drinking of embassy events and official entertainment

tiresome, but it enabled him to keep his wits about him. And both sex and espionage raised their titillating heads: he spells out his strength of purpose in resisting the former, while he handles with discretion his contribution as the accredited 'spy' in the system.

I have known John Cross by reputation for many years, as an expert on jungle warfare and as the living embodiment of Britain's deep links with the Gurkhas. However, I did not meet him in person until March 2015, when I was in Nepal to record a radio programme marking two centuries of Gurkha service to Britain. Since then my cousin has been commissioned into the Gurkhas, and I remember the pleasure with which his proud parents – not knowing of my connection – reported to me the inspirational talks delivered by John to the young officers, as to other newly minted Gurkhas, at the British Gurkha base in Pokhara.

John Cross is a natural raconteur, blessed with extraordinary powers of recall. (Is this the reward now that he is in his 90s for his abstinence?). He has a capacity to turn a phrase that is at once humorous, pithy and revealing. As a military historian I stand duly admonished by his observation in this book on my profession: 'thus is military history written – in bullshit and quick-drying ink'. This is a story of the past, but like the best history – even including military history – it tells us much about ourselves, our current predicaments, and our all-too-often inadequate and facile responses to them.

Review by Mr Hutchinson. *Editors Comment. Mr Hutchison was the 'Desk Officer' in MoD during the whole of this period.*

John Cross had his first experience of Communist revolutionary war in a jungle setting in what was then known as Cochin China in September 1945. His battalion, 1/1 Gurkha Rifles, formed part of the force that had been sent to Indo-China to disarm the Japanese occupiers and restore the French colonial power. Before long he found himself commanding a Japanese battalion, in action against the Vietminh who after briefly welcoming the British-Indian liberators turned against them as soon as they realised that they intended to restore French rule. He found the Japanese polite, obedient and efficient and the enemy skilful, cruel and determined. The reinstated French had 'learnt nothing and forgotten nothing'. Cross noted the arrogant insensitivity of their treatment of the people of Indo-China, an attitude which never altered and which would eventually ensure their defeat. It was, though he probably did not realise

it at the time, a good introduction to how to fight militant Communism in Asia – and how not to.

In 1972, by now an acknowledged expert on country insurgency and Commandant of the Jungle Warfare School, Cross was appointed Defence Attaché in Vientiane, administrative capital of the Kingdom of Laos, one of the four countries into which Indo-China had been divided following the collapse of French rule in 1954. The primary duty of a Defence Attaché is to advise his Ambassador on all aspects of the country's armed forces and to report on those forces to the Ministry of Defence in London. He must rapidly become an expert but he is strictly forbidden to engage in any form of spying and must therefore be on good terms with the country's military leadership – who may or may not encourage him to travel and visit the armed forces. Although engaged on intelligence work he is allowed only minimal contact with the secret sources of intelligence available in Whitehall. He must be discreet, tactful, hospitable, and must of course be able to converse with the people of the country in their own language. It is a difficult task in any country: in Laos when Cross arrived in November 1972 it was all but impossible.

If Laos had not existed no one would have believed that such a fantastic country could exist. In the Buddhist Kingdom with two capitals, one royal and one administrative, there seemed to be two of everything. Certainly there were two governments, one Royalist and one Communist (though not openly so). The Royal Government held rather more than half the country and was corrupt and rather amiably inefficient. It had a third rate, press-ganged, conscript army which was – apart from some of its 'irregular' units – reluctant to engage in any form of active service. It was firmly backed by the United States who used Laos as a base for bombing the North Vietnamese L of C to South Vietnam and supplied the Royal Army with arms and general assistance for those units prepared to do any fighting. It was also assisted by Thailand who supplied (secretly) volunteer troops to engage the enemy.

The rival government was the Lao Patriotic Front, a far-left Communist dominated organisation with its own army, the Pathet Lao, which was undistinguished but better than the Royal Army. Backing it and strongly influencing it was North Vietnam which usually had some of its military forces in Laos. The Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese Army controlled most of North East Laos. To add to the confusion there were the Neutralists – two varieties needless to say – one right inclined the other left inclined both with their armed forces and some territory to control. To

complete it came Communist China which had quietly occupied a whole province in North West Laos. Presiding over, or at least reporting on, this tragic-comedy was an International Control and Supervision Commission manned by three countries which were bound to disagree with each other – Canada, India and Poland. Above this and even more difficult to take seriously were the Co-Chairmen of the Geneva Accords, Great Britain and the Soviet Union, who had temporarily settled the Indo-China wars in 1954 and renewed fighting in Laos in 1962. Hence the need for both a British and a Soviet Embassy in Vientiane.

The final difficulty confronting Cross when he first arrived was his own Ambassador a singularly undiplomatic type with pronounced liberal and pacific views which included unconcealed dislike of and contempt for the Royalist Government and openly expressed hatred for American policy – the bombing campaign in particular. As a result both the Americans and the Royal Government disliked and despised the Ambassador and, by association, the country he represented.

John Cross, faced with an impossibly difficult task had two assets in his favour. He had a natural liking for and affinity with Asian people and had a remarkable gift for picking up oriental languages. He had insisted on learning Lao as well as French during his attaché training and this excited the interest and gradually the good will of the various Lao officials and others with whom he had to deal. As time went by various doors which were closed to the majority of foreign representatives were opened for him and his extensive travels took him to units which did not officially exist and to secret locations where the real war was being fought, irrespective of official 'cease-fire' periods. A new Ambassador made life easier and by 1974 Cross had accompanied the Ambassador on a visit to the headquarters of the Lao Patriotic Front. By 1975 a senior Lao general – one of the few Royalists for whom he felt respect – was actually asking his advice.

But the end was inevitable. After prolonged negotiations a Provisional Government of National Union was formed. In theory the Royalist and Lao Patriotic Front now had equal status. But power was passing slowly and inevitably into Leftist hands. The collapse in Cambodia and the fall of Saigon to the North Vietnamese sealed the fate of Laos. By the time John Cross left in 1976 the King had been forced to abdicate and Laos was a 'Democratic Republic'. Those Royalists who had not managed to flee abroad were being 're-educated'. The most

notable effect of Communist rule was a prolonged and serious shortage of food.

Despite all the difficulties John Cross was an outstanding Defence Attaché and his OBE was more than well earned. His reports gave both the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence a uniquely well-informed view of the unhappy country to which he was assigned. A paper he wrote on combating communist revolutionary warfare was circulated by the Foreign Office to all British embassies. The times and troubles that this book describes are now part of history but the book will remain a fascinating account of a difficult assignment in a uniquely interesting land. Simon Hutchinson September 2008.