Observations from an Asian experience

By Emery Maddocks

I was recently privileged to travel to Asia, with the Ancient & Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts on a visit to Beijing, China and Bangkok, Thailand. Admittedly the trip was primarily tourism, but there was also a significant ceremonial aspect to this journey as the Company is tasked with serving as goodwill ambassadors for the City of Boston, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the United States.

On most annual trips the Company is involved with dedicating memorials to U.S. servicemen and women killed in past wars. This year we were privileged to be involved in something significant, but far more joyous than a war memorial. 2008 is the 175th anniversary of the establishment of formal diplomatic relations with the Kingdom of Thailand and the United States. The Treaty of Amity and Commerce between our two nations, written in 1833 represents our oldest formal relationship with an Asian nation. Thailand is a steadfast ally of the United States and a significant trading partner.

On Friday, Oct. 10, the grounds of the Free Thai Memorial, dedicated to the Thai resistance to Japanese occupation during WWII, the Ancient & Honorable Artillery Company of London, Massachusetts and the City of Boston attended the unveiling of the model of the Honourable Artillery Company of Massachusetts, a nine-foot replica of the monument in London dedicated to the Americans who lost their lives in the seas and sky around Iceland during WWII. In both cases there had been no memorial to the hundreds of Americans who perished in and around those countries during the war. Also, in all cases the ceremonies were well attended by U.S., host nation and the diplomatic community officials.

The Ancient & Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts was organized in 1637 and chartered in 1638 on the model of the Honourable Artillery Company of London, to train officers for the Massachusetts Militia. The Company performed that role until the inception of the federally directed National Guard system in 1912. Since that time the Company has continued as a military fraternal and patriotic organization that serves a ceremonial role for the Governor of Massachusetts and the City of Boston.

Over the years the membership has included a who’s who of Massachusetts including Calvin Coolidge, John F. Kennedy, Leverett Saltonstall, Christian Hearter and James Michael Curley. The current membership includes two Medal of Honor recipients, many distinguished military veterans and a cross section of business people, academics and professionals. The Company maintains a rather unique military museum at its Faneuil Hall headquarters, our home since 1745.

Subsequent to the Thai visit a number of us, including several Vietnam veterans, took the opportunity to visit Saigon and Hanoi. It was my first trip back since the war and things have certainly changed. The country seems prosperous, signage is all in Vietnamese and English, prices are listed in Vietnamese dong and U.S. dollars. In the words of our guide, the people prefer to look forward rather than backward. The U.S. is Vietnam’s number one trading partner and its number four source of tourism dollars after China, Korea and Australia. Thirty three years of peace have mellowed the place out and the government has opened up physically and attitudinally, encouraging trade and exploiting its wonderful tourism potential.

As with China, there is nothing like burgeoning trade relations to enhance friendly people to people relations.