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Sutipatt Sudhisarnakorn takes aim at a target at a shooting range near Bangkok. Photos: Tibor Krausz, handout

At home on the range

Thailand has a thriving gun culture, with millions of weapons – legal and illegal – in the country, and enthusiasts in knock-off uniforms who draw inspiration from war movies

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At a grassy open-air shooting range outside Bangkok, Sutipatt Sudhisarnakorn and Apichai Karnjanakantika are about to storm an imaginary terrorist stronghold.

Sutipatt is a flight attendant for a Thai airline and Apichai runs an animal feed business. Right now, though, the young Thai men resemble hardened US Navy Seal commandos.

Dressed in camouflage combat outfits, they are crouching behind a training barricade, itching for some action with their guns at the ready. Their uniforms are Chinese-made knock-offs, complete with dummy grenades, and the carrier vests are fortified not with bulletproof plates but flimsy foam. Yet the two firearm enthusiasts' assault rifles and handguns are real military-grade weapons with live bullets.

"You can even buy original Seal uniforms online with sweat stains from the soldiers who wore them," Sutipatt, 27, says. "I like dressing up to get into the mood for shooting with my guns."

Apichai and Sutipatt belong to a group of like-minded gun enthusiasts in their 20s and 30s

who have come to this outdoor shooting range on a recent Friday for a day of military role-play with high-powered weaponry.

With their arsenal of firearms and boxes of ammunition laid out on aluminium tables, they look like a mini-militia. Their US Army-style outfits, forbidding firepower and high jinks make them stand out at the range, where other hobbyists, wearing T-shirts and jeans, are firing handguns and rifles at adjacent shooting galleries.

We don't just want to point and shoot. We like learning new techniques in re-enacted combat situations

LITTASIT MARKBORDEE, CAR-PARTS SALESMAN

A hulking, mild-mannered man, Sutipatt has just grown a beard in imitation of his idol, the late Navy Seal marksman Chris Kyle, whose exploits in Iraq served as the basis for the 2014 Hollywood drama *American Sniper*.

"Our inspirations come from

war movies that are true to life, like *Black Hawk Down*," Sutipatt says. "We devise combat scenarios and act them out."

Currently he's acting out one with a 9mm semi-automatic rifle and a Glock pistol holstered at the hip. The weapons are two of the eight military-grade firearms he owns; among the others are a high-precision sniper rifle. He has five of them with him at the range today. The only incongruous item in his army kit is his plastic lunchbox with Winnie-the-Pooh on its lid.

Apichai is toting a short-barrelled MK18 carbine, a common Special Forces weapon of choice for firefights at close quarters. He, too, carries a handgun in a holster for extra firepower.

Suddenly the two friends burst from behind their cover on the grassy ground to take out the "terrorists" – several targets erected before a bank of sand.

Sutipatt fires off a few quick rounds, but Apichai begins fumbling with his rifle. Something has gone awry. Sutipatt barks an order and they both draw their pistols to finish off their imaginary foes.

"His gun got jammed and I ran out of ammo," Sutipatt says, perspiring heavily under a scorching midday sun. "Whatever happens, you have to think on your feet," he

adds. "I know it's only make-believe, but we take it seriously."

Things go swimmingly the second time, so they move on to other training exercises. "We're going to simulate coming under fire in a hallway and neutralising our targets," says Apichai, who owns an AR-9 combat rifle, a Remington pump-action shotgun, and a Glock 17 pistol.

An elderly Chinese-Thai man doing target practice nearby with a small-bore, bolt-action sporting rifle peers through a telescopic sight with a bespectacled eye. "That gun is only good for shooting squirrels," Sutipatt scoffs out of earshot.

"We don't just want to point and shoot," Littasit Markbordee, 30, a car-parts salesman who has two shotguns and two pistols, says. "We like learning new techniques in re-enacted combat situations."

He is clad in a mercenary outfit with camouflage khakis and a black plate carrier vest over a matching T-shirt. "I wear special outfits for the range, but I don't overdo it so people won't give me a funny look," he says.

A love of both cosplay and firearms has spawned a popular subculture in which Thai teens and twenty-somethings, mostly male, dress up in replica army uniforms. They shoot small plastic pellets at one another with toy imitations of military weapons known as airsoft guns.

Injuries can occur during pitched battles in simulated combat settings, but with proper protective gear they are rare. "I started out with airsoft guns in high school," Sutipatt says. "That was as close to guns as I could get."

He is a rarity in that few airsoft enthusiasts move on to real military-grade weapons, not least because they can be prohibitively expensive for most Thais. Sutipatt's two assault rifles alone set him back by 180,000 baht (HK\$43,400) and 150,000 baht. That's far more than they would have cost him in the US, he says.

He needed to pass rigorous background checks to own the firearms legally. Plenty more Thais buy their guns on the black market, however.

There are more than 6 million registered firearms in private hands in Thailand and at least another 4 million unregistered ones, according to GunPolicy.org, a comprehensive database on global gun ownership rates. With so



800,000

The number of followers firearms influencer Kotchanok Suta has on Facebook, almost all of them men

dead. He proceeded to kill another 28 people and wound 57 others, mostly at a Buddhist temple and a shopping centre, before he was killed by police.

"Thai society is quite violent. Even trivial disagreements can escalate fast," says Littasit, speaking from experience. Once, while changing lanes in his car in Bangkok, he upset another driver, who responded by pointing a gun at him. "It was very scary," he recalls.

Another time, in a crowded bar, he brushed up against a drunk teenager who, incensed by the inadvertent contact, confronted Littasit by pushing a handgun's muzzle threateningly into his abdomen.

"It's better if you learn to defend yourself, but I would never use a gun in an argument," the salesman says. "People shouldn't carry a gun in case they feel tempted to use it. But some guys are gun-ho and trigger-happy."

At the range, Littasit is trying out a pistol he has just bought from Visara, the combat instructor. "You need to have self-control and handle your weapons safely," Visara explains to Littasit. "Otherwise, there can be grave consequences. Even a stray or ricochet bullet can kill a person."

Last year one of Visara's students shot himself through the thigh accidentally with a pistol as he placed it back into a holster on his belt. He has now recovered and is back shooting. "I hope he's learned his lesson," the instructor observes.

Despite their potential to kill and maim, firearms are viewed by many Thais as cool toys and coveted status symbols.

Kotchanok Suta, a stylish, soft-spoken young woman, has collected dozens of expensive guns. One of her favourites is a Korth Combat Revolver .357 Magnum, a German-made handgun she calls "the Rolls-Royce of revolvers".

She bought it for 300,000 baht and prizes it like a luxury watch or designer handbag. "I rarely shoot with it. I just want to have it and show it off," says Kotchanok, 29, a firearms influencer who has about 800,000 followers on Facebook, almost all of them men.

Kotchanok's popularity is due partly to the sultry pictures and sexy videos she posts of herself in racy outfits posing with her guns or firing them at a range. "Many guys love guns. I do, too," she says. "It's cool to have guns and go shooting with them."

many guns around, Thailand has the second-highest rate of gun-related killings in Southeast Asia, behind the Philippines.

"It's easy to get all kinds of guns illegally and many are in the wrong hands," says Visara Singharaj, a self-defence instructor who sells weapons at a shop in Bangkok's Chinatown.

Business and family disputes, perceived slights, and suspected infidelity can all lead to shots being fired in anger. Many Thais, motivated by misguided machismo, reach for their weapons at the slightest provocation, often with deadly results.

In February, a 31-year-old army sergeant major went on a 12-hour rampage in the provincial city of Nakhon Ratchasima, disgruntled by the outcome of a property deal he had struck with a superior officer, whom he shot



Apichai Karnjanakantika (with glasses) and Sutipatt Sudhisarnakorn (with beard) train on range (right); and getting ready for some target practice (below).

