

Intermediary profile Creveling & Creveling

In the danger zone

For the Creveling husband-and-wife team, attending the famous West Point military academy in the US was an ideal training ground for living and working in Thailand
By Helen Burggraf

Back in November, anti-government demonstrators took to the streets of Bangkok for the second time in less than four years, in a series of protests that rapidly escalated. Within a week, four demonstrators had been killed and dozens more were injured.

As this issue went to press, the political crisis sparked by the demonstrations seemed far from over, and was disrupting the daily lives of many expatriates living in the Thai capital as well as elsewhere in the country.

For Chad and Peggy Creveling, the husband-and-wife team which heads up Bangkok-based Creveling & Creveling Private Wealth Advisory, the sight of throngs of Thai protesters forcing their way into government buildings and attacking pro-government supporters has, they say, been no less disheartening for them than it has been for other expats and Thais

living in the increasingly divided country.

That said, unlike many of their clients or, it might be imagined, any other husband-and-wife advisory team in the world, the Crevelings are both graduates of a US military academy. And not just any military academy, but West Point.

The historic, 211-year-old institution located about 50 miles north of New York City, which only started admitting women cadets in 1977, was the alma mater of two US presidents as well as a virtual army of top US military generals, politicians and even astronauts.

New recruits

While West Point isn't generally thought of as a natural training ground for future financial services executives, it could not have been a bad place to have spent a few formative years for those now based in politically unstable modern Thailand.

And it has probably been useful, the Crevelings admit. But not just because, being a military academy, it prepares young men and women to face the world's danger zones in their future lives, they say.

For Chad, who graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in engineering, the advantage for him was the priority West Point places on professionalism and ethics.

Peggy, who also graduated with an engineering degree, stresses how the institution prepares cadets to face and overcome major challenges, such as those she and Chad have faced in building a fee-only financial planning and investment advisory practice for expatriates in Asia.

As for the current political turmoil, the Crevelings see it as the start of a new chapter in what has been an ongoing transitional period for Thailand.

"We, as much as anyone, would like to see a peaceful resolution as soon as possible, although we realise the complex issues involved may make this difficult," Chad says.

28-year partnership

The partnership that is Creveling & Creveling began 28 years ago at West Point, where Chad, who grew up on a remote island in Lake Champlain in upstate Vermont, met Peggy, a native of Wisconsin and Ohio.

Two years ahead of her, Chad was commissioned as a US Army infantry officer after graduation, while Peggy chose to go into military intelligence.

They trained in separate locations, married, and ended up stationed together in Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, home of the 25th Infantry Division, which is the US Army's stateside outpost for deployments to Asia. (Schofield Barracks is also famous to film buffs as the setting for the 1953 film *From Here to Eternity*.)

"The annual Team Spirit military exercise in Korea was my first experience with Asia," Peggy recalls, explaining how she got hooked on the region. "But Chad had already travelled out here as a cadet. He liked to travel everywhere."

After seven and five years, respectively, with the army, the Crevelings began to tire of having to spend much of their lives apart, and began looking for a career that would suit their skills and interests while also allowing them to live overseas.

Their first stop – which also turned out to be their last, at least so far – was Bangkok, where they found work in the city's institutional brokerage sector. Chad initially worked for W I Carr Indosuez, and later Asset Plus Securities, while Peggy's employers included Paribas Asia Equity and Citigroup/Salomon Smith Barney.

In those days, says Chad, the Southeast Asian stock markets were "booming, with Thailand at the epicentre".

"In 1993, a certain market strategist said 'buy Asia', and everyone did," adds Peggy.

"Money from all over the world flooded into the region, and the Thai stock market went absolutely crazy. Back then, if you were a fund manager, you couldn't effectively buy China, Korea or Taiwan, but you could buy Hong Kong, Singapore and the Southeast Asian stock markets. It was a really exciting time."

Back into service

The private client advisory firm known as Creveling & Creveling emerged a little later, after years of further deliberations, study and licence-getting.

Chad says the idea came to them when they were working in institutional finance in Bangkok, "and were looking around for people who could provide us with good advice about our finances. Not people with products to sell, but someone who could actually answer our expat financial

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Chad Creveling, managing director, Creveling & Creveling

planning questions, as well as helping us to navigate the cross-border tax issues that arise where the US and Thai tax codes meet".

"We never did find anyone," he recalls. "And even though we were chartered financial analysts, we didn't have the specific knowledge, or the time, to research it."

Their first business model was too

broad, Chad says, so they decided "to work with a smaller number of people, kind of like a family office for affluent clients in Southeast Asia".

"What we try to do is provide an integrated service model that incorporates investment advisory, financial planning, and financial decision-making support," Chad continues. "We work with our clients on an ongoing, fee-only, no commission basis, like their own personal chief financial officer."

Adds Peggy: "We partner with our clients. We don't custody, we don't trade, we don't take possession of anyone's money; what we do is analyse and provide advice on all aspects of household finances, the way we used to look at companies when we did institutional research for our brokerage clients."

"Do they have a long-term plan? Is it likely to work? What are the risks

they face, what problems are they likely to run into?"

An American story

Although half of Creveling & Creveling's clients are not Americans, but expatriates from other mostly-English-speaking countries, Peggy and Chad specialise in understanding the difficulties Americans living abroad are facing these days, in part because they are themselves American. Blog topics on their website include "Eight US Tax-saving Tips for American Expats" and "American Expats: Don't get caught by US Tax Rules on Foreign Investments".

While Japanese expats are the largest foreign contingent in Thailand, Americans are also well represented, Chad says, due to its popularity as a manufacturing centre, and the fact that it's home to the UN's regional headquarters, which in turn attracts

Thailand's troubles

The irony of Thailand is that in many ways, it is a peaceful place, populated by a seemingly tolerant and gentle electorate, many of whom are practicing Buddhists.

But beneath this veneer, say Western observers, lie frustrations rooted in poverty and resentment of certain well-connected Thai politicians, who are seen to be corrupt and indifferent to their peoples' wishes.

The most recent unrest erupted after controversial legislation was proposed that would have allowed the country's ousted ex-prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, to return to Thailand without having to serve a jail term for corruption. The bill was defeated, but the demonstrators, led by an opposition politician, claimed that the current prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra, was a "puppet" of her exiled older brother and needed to be replaced.

This was in spite of the fact that she was elected to the office in 2011 by a landslide majority.

The removal of Thaksin Shinawatra from power in a military coup in 2006 is seen as having set the stage for the continuing political instability that, seven years on, seems to elude resolution.

Thailand, which is ranked by the MSCI index as an emerging market country, is the world's No. 1 producer of rubber and Southeast Asia's second-largest economy. It is known for being the only country in the region to have escaped colonial rule.

many non-governmental organisations. The US Embassy here is also one of America's largest.

"And increasingly, we're also seeing American retirees," Chad says.

"It's a growing trend. It's not huge yet, but it's definitely growing."

Americans who have been living abroad for much if not most of their working lives, he notes, are not automatically going to head for Florida, the way their US-based cousins might; and yet, if they've been working in Singapore, "they're not going to retire there or Japan or China or Dubai."

"When they do their research, Thailand often comes out pretty high up the ranking." ●

