

Robert H. Thornhill  
7191 SW 161<sup>st</sup> Place  
Beaverton, OR 97007  
503-848-8349, [rhtkaze1@aol.com](mailto:rhtkaze1@aol.com)

Written Testimony for  
Senate Rules Committee  
Re: Senate Concurrent Resolution 3  
Recognizing the Contributions and Sacrifices of  
Peace Corps Volunteers

February 12, 2015

My name is Robert H. Thornhill. I live in Beaverton, Oregon. I consider it a privilege to submit this testimony in support of Senate Concurrent Resolution 3. As a general rule, along with members of the US Armed Forces, Peace Corps volunteers represent America's finest.

In the course of my work and travel, prior to becoming a Peace Corps volunteer myself, I had the opportunity to associate with Peace Corps volunteers and see their achievements first hand. I will describe one of those encounters, as an example. I will then describe how I became a Peace Corps volunteer and my work as a volunteer on the faculty of the Latvia Maritime Academy, Riga, Latvia, 1996-98.

I first encountered Peace Corps volunteers and their work when serving as the Director of Personnel on the staff of Headquarters, US Army Support, Thailand, 1967-1971. As USARSUPTHAI supported the US missions in Vietnam and Laos, it also engaged in nation building in Thailand itself. For example, among USARSUPTHAI's many nation building projects, its two engineer battalions constructed hard surface roads from the Gulf of Siam in the south to the Mekong River in the north, with connecting hard surface roads to the several air bases from which the US Air Force bombed and strafed enemy forces in Vietnam. For the first time these roads truly opened the furthestmost northeast of Thailand to the rest of the nation. Some of the air bases presently serve as commercial airports. (Utapao, the former B-52 base in south Thailand is an example.)

(Other nation building projects in which USARSUPTHAI was involved include a deep-water commercial seaport on the Gulf of Siam, an army headquarters kaserne and hospital in Korat left to the Thai army, a modern microwave and tropospheric(?) communications system.)

The aforementioned engineer battalions were Type B units. They had a command structure of perhaps six US Army personnel including the commanders, usually Lt Colonels. All the employees below this small command staff were Thai civilians (approximately 800 in each battalion as I recall). Few, if any, of the US personnel spoke Thai. They communicated with and directed their Thai employees through Thai interpreters. These Thai interpreters were crucial to the effective operation of the battalions, and on occasion they acted toward the Thai workforce pretty much as deputy commanders. Many, if not all, of these skilled interpreters

gained their knowledge of the English language from Peace Corps volunteers teaching in the elementary, secondary and post-secondary schools of Thailand.

The Peace Corps volunteers took America and its values into Thai communities. They lived with and like the Thais. No indoor plumbing (flush toilets, hot showers, indeed no cold showers either), few homes in north and northeast Thailand enjoyed electricity at that time. They ate the same food and suffered the same occasional stomach ailments as the Thais. No Post Exchanges, no Commissaries, no Post Theaters and Libraries, no EM, NCO or Officer and Civilian Clubs. Being in effect a real part of the communities in which they lived, their impacts and influences as Americans were magnified.

Prior to the introduction of Peace Corps volunteers in the early 1960s, English was not widely spoken in Thailand. Japanese and German were the predominant foreign languages. Thais studying abroad usually went either to Japan or Germany. In large measure due to the work of Peace Corps volunteers, English became widely spoken, and eventually became the predominant foreign language. And I believe the United States is now the country of choice for Thai students studying abroad. Undoubtedly the work of Peace Corps volunteers contributed significantly to the establishment and continuance of the good and mutually beneficial relations between the peoples and governments of Thailand and the United States.

In 1994, retired from the Department of the Army, and occupied only with a bit of volunteer work with the Lions and at the University of Oklahoma, I took off and visited Vietnam and Thailand, where I had spent about 6 years of my life (65-71). At the conclusion of my visit to Vietnam and Thailand, I decided to stay a little longer in order to fulfill a long-held dream of visiting China. I bought a Chinese language phrase book, and backpacked around China for about 6 weeks.

In China I was invited into several high schools and a college in Beijing to speak with the students and faculty, primarily those engaged in studying and teaching English. I was asked several times to stay and teach English. As I talked with students and attempted to answer their questions related to the English language, its grammar, etc., it became clear that while I could speak English fairly correctly, I didn't know the first thing about teaching English.

From what I had learned about the Peace Corps in Thailand, I knew the Peace Corps, if I was accepted as a volunteer, could and would teach me how to teach English. I had found no satisfaction in retirement. Serving in the Peace Corps could fill that void. In addition, it would be a way to pay back, in small way, for the good life America had provided me. Therefore, I returned to Oklahoma and joined the Peace Corps with the goal of returning to China as a Peace Corps volunteer. The Peace Corps, however, had other ideas. Rather than China, the Peace Corps sent me to Latvia.

Latvia, along with the other Baltic nations of Estonia and Lithuania, declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. All three immediately initiated actions to integrate politically and economically with Europe and the United States, and, in the case of Latvia, eventually



militarily into NATO. Knowledge of the English language was essential to such integration as English is the language of the sea, the air, international commerce, and of NATO.

Under the Soviets the teaching of English in public education institutions was generally forbidden. To make up for the deficiency in English, one of the first acts of all three Baltic nations was to request assistance from the Peace Corps, not only in teaching English but also in others areas such as small business development. The Peace Corps responded with alacrity. The first contingent of Peace Corps volunteers arrived in the Baltics in 1992.

After becoming acquainted with the effectiveness of Peace Corps volunteers in Latvian high schools and colleges, the Latvian Maritime Academy (LMA) requested that a volunteer teacher of English be assigned to the Academy. I happened to be the first such volunteer, assigned in the fall of 1996. I suspect my service in the US Submarine fleet during the Korean War, plus subsequent work on commercial vessels in three voyages across the Pacific, had something to do with that assignment. Anyway, at the Academy I was able to put those experiences to good use.

To me my start at the Academy was rocky. When given my class assignments, I was instructed to give priority to teaching the English language of Oceanography to a group of students scheduled to shortly go to Great Britain to study advanced hydrography. I asked where I could find the text books for the Oceanography class, as well as for my other classes. It turned out that a text book for Oceanography did not exist at the Academy; indeed there were no text books for any of my assigned classes. Moreover, there were no class-size sets of English text books for any course taught at the Academy. My supervisor advised that the Latvian English instructors developed course outlines, lectures, etc. from their own knowledge of the subject and from Russian language text books. Like I knew more than a few words of Russian.

Panic set in as I scurried around Riga searching for an English language book on Oceanography. The British Council, the British equivalent to the Peace Corps, after I found them, finally saved me. From their library they gave me a book on Oceanography authored by a US Navy Captain.

While I was searching around Riga for books related to my assigned courses, I called on friends in the United States. A friend at Fort Belvoir's army transportation school sent all kinds of material related to movement of cargo by ship. Soon friends from Fort Bliss, Texas; Camp Pendleton, California; US Army headquarters in Hawaii and other places started sending material and or small amounts of cash to buy books. In short order I was flooded with English language material related to all aspects of the maritime industry. Thus the beginnings of the Latvian Maritime Resource Center located in the Maritime Academy but available to all Latvians practicing and/or aspiring to careers in the maritime industry.

Before turning to a detailed description of my service as a volunteer, I want to address, from my perspective, one significant difference between Peace Corps volunteer service and military service. As a Guardsman in the Oklahoma National Guard, as a sailor in the submarine fleet, as a Department of the Army civilian in Japan, Korea, southeast Asia, in Europe, in the Middle East,



and in the US (including the Pentagon), I was always a part of a team, a team that had frequently trained together, had a clear understanding of the total mission and each individual's part in that mission. If I failed or fell short in my part, there was always a team mate to take up the slack.

Not so with my assignment to the Latvia Maritime Academy. I was the sole American on the faculty, perhaps the first American many of the students had ever seen. All eyes were on me, always, or at least I felt they were. Could and would I contribute, what did I have to offer, how would I behave, make a fool of myself, would I succeed or fail? I represented more than just myself and the Peace Corps; I represented the United States of America. There were no other Americans around to take up the slack if I failed. Not even my Latvian colleagues could pick up where I fell short. They did not have the knowledge and skills I brought to the job, otherwise I probably wouldn't have been there. Being constantly observed, this prominence, so to speak, constituted not only a burden and stress factor, but also, a strong motivator. I could not, would not fail my country or my students, or myself, for that matter. Fortunately, as indicated by the attached enclosures I did not fail.

Every one of the Peace Corps volunteers in my cohort were, like me, the lone American in their assigned organization, and in cases of assignments away from Riga, many were the only American in the entire community. From my discussions with several of them, I discerned that they too, much as I did, felt the burden and the strain, plus the motivation of being the sole rep of America in their community and organization, with eyes always on them, judging them, their behavior and their competence. In my opinion, my cohorts did not fail themselves, the United States, the Peace Corps, their students or Latvia and its people. Google Peace Corps in Latvia and you will find several websites confirming that Peace Corps volunteers succeeded in making a long-lasting impact for the better on Latvia and its people.

Upon completion of Peace Corps service each volunteer in the Baltics was issued a Volunteer Description of Service prepared by the country staff, signed by the Country Director and countersigned by the volunteer. (Presumably this is, or was, a Peace Corps-wide practice.) A copy of mine is attached as enclosure 1. It specifies the training I received and the duties I performed during my service in Latvia.

Attached as enclosure 2 is a copy of a letter, dated March 5, 1998, from the Baltics Director which commends my work at the Maritime Academy. I do not hesitate to point out that he characterized my work as "superb."

Attached as enclosure 3 is a letter of 14 June 1998 from a co-worker, Lily Loy, a Singaporean, sponsored in Thailand, as I understood, by a Singapore organization similar to the Peace Corps. While Ms. Loy commends my teaching skills, she emphasizes my efforts at collecting and making English language teaching materials available to the Academy faculty and its students.

Finally, attached as enclosure 4 is a copy of a letter, dated June 15, 1998, from the Director of the Peace Corps commending me, in a sense, for no more than being a relatively old, in age,

Peace Corps volunteer. Age 67 at that time. I arrived in Latvia to commence training on 7 June 1996, my 65<sup>th</sup> birthday. In its early years, the vast majority of volunteers were young, recent college graduates. As the Peace Corps aged, so did its volunteers. Perhaps this phenomenon is attributable to some degree to Lillian Carter, President Carter's mother and her Peace Corps service in India.

I much appreciate the initiative of Senator Dembrow and others to acknowledge the contributions of Peace Corps volunteers by introducing SCR-3. Everybody likes to be recognized for their good deeds, and I suggest deserve to be recognized when they make a difference for the better in the lives of others.

I suggest Senate Concurrent Resolution 3 has the potential to serve a function equally important as recognition of contributions and sacrifices of returned volunteers. As an older Peace Corps volunteer myself, I see SCR-3 as having the potential to convince retired Americans, bored and just twiddling their thumbs, that the Peace Corps offers opportunities to put their experiences to good use, for America and for an underdeveloped nation.

My impression is that in the early years of the Peace Corps, the popular notion was for the young to serve the Peace Corps right after completing college and before starting a career and a family. Then the Peace Corps was not considered really appropriate for the older citizen; it was for the young, the single, and the exuberant. No question the young served well the Peace Corps and the countries to which assigned.

However, as indicated by enclosure 4, as the Peace Corps has grown older the intake of older volunteers has increased. As opposed to intake only before careers and families are started, the Peace Corps now offers more opportunities to those at the other end of the spectrum. Those who have raised their families and completed their careers are now considered good prospects for Peace Corps service. It is suggested that SCR-3 has the potential to make the Peace Corps appealing to retirees in good health, with energy and a desire to continue to make a difference.

Recommend this committee approve SCR-3.

  
Robert H. Thornhill

4 enclosures

1. Volunteer Description of Service
2. Ltr, 5 Mar 98, fm Country Director
3. Memo, 14 June 98, fm Lily Loy
4. Ltr, 18 June 98, fm Director of Peace Corps





# Peace Corps, Latvia

## *Volunteer Description Of Service*

**Robert H. Thornhill**

TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

RIGA, LATVIA 1996-1998

Robert H. Thornhill began Peace Corps Training on June 7, 1996 and completed a comprehensive 12-week training program in Latvia while living with a Latvian host family. The training program consisted of three main components:

**1. Intensive Language Training**

12 week intensive Latvian language

**2. Cross-Cultural Training**

12-week program included lectures and discussions on the political, economic, and social development of Latvia and Eastern Europe. Various issues were discussed and analyzed in-depth including the role of women in society, the development of religion, the human rights situation, the historical transformation, and the educational system. The training was enhanced by guest speakers and excursions.

**3. Technical Training for Teacher of English as a Foreign Language**

Mr. Thornhill successfully completed the following studies/activities:

- Teaching Methodologies including grammar translation, audio lingual, communicative, and whole language teaching
- Language Learning Styles
- Development of integrated theme based units
- Seminars in lesson planning, classroom management, exam writing, and student assessment
- Comparative educational styles
- 3-week model school teaching practicum

#### **4. In-Service Training**

Mr. Thornhill completed an advanced course on Maritime English taught by a representative of the United Nations International Maritime Organization (British Sea Captain F. W. Weeks). Upon completion Mr. Thornhill was examined and certified qualified to teach maritime English to UN IMO STWC standards.

#### **Primary Assignment**

Mr. Thornhill was sworn in the Peace Corps on 21 August 1996 and completed his two-year tour on 20 August 1998. During his service, he served as a full-time Teacher of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at the Latvian Maritime Academy, Riga, Latvia. In this capacity he was responsible for teaching general English, business English and maritime English to university level students. Among special teaching assignments Mr. Thornhill prepared the syllabus, developed course material and taught English for Oceanography for students preparing to study advanced hydrography in the United Kingdom. Additionally, he prepared the syllabus for and taught business English to students majoring in Port Management.

#### **Secondary Projects**

##### **1. Maritime Resource Center**

Prepared the justification for a small project grant to establish a Maritime Resource Center for the Latvian maritime community. This grant was used primarily to purchase textbooks and other resource materials in the English language.

Prepared the justification for a grant from the British Council for critically needed class-size sets of maritime English textbooks.

Received and presented to the Latvian Maritime Academy, on behalf of the Lions Club, Norman, Oklahoma, two class-size sets of English language textbooks.

##### **2. Intensive English Language Course**

In the summer of 1998 conceived, designed and taught a three-week intensive English language course, focusing on the macro skills of writing and reading.

##### **3. Swedish Institute Courses**

In the summers of 1997 and 1998 assisted the Swedish Institute with the logistics for the conduct of three-week intensive language training to a mixed group of students from Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Poland. Studied and observed the teaching techniques of the Swedish instructors.



**4. Collection/Distribution of Used Clothing**

Throughout his two-year stint in Latvia, collected used clothing from the United States and Sweden and distributed to needy families in Latvia, primarily in the rural area of Engure.

**5. Tutoring**

Throughout his tour in Latvia tutored approximately four to six hours each week. Students involved faculty members of the Latvian Maritime Academy, the Ministry of Defense, the Latvian Maritime Administration and the staff of a rehabilitation center for handicapped children.

**6. English Language Materials Preparation**

Wrote and/or edited English materials for the Latvian Maritime Academy Rector and staff. This included correspondence for the Rector and his deputy, brochures, syllabuses, and mission statements for the various departments.

Pursuant to Section 5(f) of the Peace Corps Act 22 U.S.C. 2504(f), as amended, any former Volunteer employed by the United States Government following his Peace Corps Volunteer Service is entitled to have any period of satisfactory Peace Corps service credited for purposes of retirement, seniority, reduction in force, leave and other privileges based on length of Government service. That service shall not be credited toward completion of the probationary or trial period of any service requirement for career appointment.

This is to certify in accordance with Executive Order 11103 of April 10, 1963, that Mr. Robert H. Thornhill served satisfactorily as a Peace Corps Volunteer. His service ended on 20 August 1998. He is therefore eligible to be appointed as a career-conditional employee in a non-competitive basis. This benefit under the Executive order extends for a period of one year after termination of Volunteer service, except that the employing agency may extend the period for up to three years for a former Volunteer who enters military service, pursues studies at recognized institution of higher learning, or engages in other activities which, in the view of the appointing agency, warrants extension of the period.



Peace Corps Volunteer



Baudouin de Marcken  
Country Director/Latvia

August 20, 1998  
Date





**PEACE CORPS**  
OF THE UNITED STATES

March 5, 1998

Mr. Robert Thornhill  
Brivibas iela 52-19  
LV-1206 Riga, Latvija

Dear Robert,

Thanks for the opportunity of meeting with you, the Director, your colleagues in the Language Department and, surely not least, with your students. Daiga and I truly appreciated the visit. On this, my first visit to students at the academy, I was most impressed with the work you and your fellow teachers of English have done. Clearly the students we met are at ease in English and are quite in control of conversations in the language. Given their career choice, their skill will serve them well.

In our conversations, both with the Director and with members of the faculty, Daiga and I left no doubt as to the Peace Corps' commitment to seek to identify and to appoint a qualified Peace Corps Volunteer to follow on your pioneering work. I am confident we shall have such a person. It is only thanks to your steadfast work over the past eighteen months, however, that we shall have the opportunity of offering such a challenging and important posting.

There were times when you seemed uncertain of your skill as a teacher and of your suitability for what is a pioneering assignment. I don't think Daiga -- or, at some remove, I -- ever shared in those doubts. Having now seen in your students the fruits of your work, *I know* you have done a superb job. Thanks ever so much.

Best regards,

Baudouin de Marcken  
Country Director  
Peace Corps/Estonia, Latvia & Lithuania

Riga, 14 June 1998

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Robert H. Thornhill has been my colleague for the past two academic years (August 1996 to June 1998) at the Latvian Maritime Academy in Riga. During this time we taught English for general and specific purposes (maritime and business).

My students and I are particularly indebted to Mr. Thornhill for his unsparing and dogged efforts, not only to procure basic teaching materials (text-books and other resource materials), but in ensuring that they were made available to them.

As a teacher, Mr. Thornhill has made it his priority to build-up and encourage his students' confidence in themselves and to create the space and opportunity for freer and more open exchange, so vital to authentic communication.

By establishing contacts with colleagues in other departments of the Academy, through English teaching and the exchange of books and information, Mr. Thornhill has taken a significant step in extending the borders of English learning - so that, if carried forward, it might become a more broad-based exercise, rather than an activity confined to the precincts of the English Department.

Both Mr. Thornhill's dedication and commitment to the task in hand and his sincere efforts to help, make him an invaluable member of any organisation that he may serve in.

*Lily Loy*

---



THE DIRECTOR OF THE PEACE CORPS  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

June 15, 1998

Mr. Robert Thornhill  
Peace Corps Volunteer  
Peace Corps -- Latvia

Dear Robert:

On May 29, 1998, the Peace Corps celebrated "Senior Volunteer Appreciation Day" in recognition of the important role that senior Volunteers play in the agency's mission.

Our forum included a presentation by James E. "Chip" Carter, grandson of Miss Lillian Carter, who spoke of the profound impact his grandmother's Volunteer experience had on his entire family. I am sure that your family and friends share similar sentiments. Other senior Volunteers described their service, and many Returned Volunteers in the audience spoke of the leadership that senior Volunteers provide at post due to their experience and maturity.

I would like to take this opportunity to let you know that all of us recognize the unique contributions that you are making. Enclosed is a message from President Clinton honoring each of the 430 senior Volunteers currently serving in the Peace Corps. I join him in extending my sincere appreciation for your commitment to world peace and international understanding.

Sincerely,

  
Mark D. Gearan  
Director

ENCL 4