THE MILITARY WAY

IN HIS OWN WORDS:
Colonel Chit Myaing

TATMA Daw Tales
THE MILITARY WAY

Burma's military, the Tatmadaw, has ruled the country for over thirty-five years, leaving many to ponder at its staying-power. Analysts have historically attributed the army's ability to maintain control to the personality and persona of its leader, General Ne Win. The Tatmadaw has a long history, however, with many individuals contributing to its formation and growth. Here the author takes a thoughtful look at those who helped transform the military during the chaotic decades following World War II into the potent and durable force that exists today.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

The Tatmadaw owes much of what it is to the soldiers who contributed to its formation and development. Retired Colonel Chit Myaing began as a member of the All Burma Students' Union in 1941 and rose through the ranks of the Burma Independence Army to become a key player in Ne Win's Caretaker Government and Revolutionary Council. In this interview with Burma Debate, Colonel Chit Myaing discusses his years in the military and his relationship with General Aung San, General Ne Win and others who made up the early Tatmadaw.

TATMADAW TALES

Former Brigadier General Aung Gyi has had a political career spanning the fight for independence of the early 1940s to the pro-democracy movement of 1988. One of the founders of the Socialist Party in Burma and a prominent member of the Revolutionary Council, Aung Gyi fell from grace and was imprisoned for his outspoken criticism of the government's economic policies and the abuses by the Tatmadaw. In an extremely rare and risky move, Aung Gyi made public his concerns through a series of open letters to General Ne Win and other members of Burma's Revolutionary Council. The excerpts included here contend that only the personal intervention of General Ne Win can change the course of the current-day Tatmadaw and move the country toward true democratic reform.
THE DEBATE

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The Early Years

Building an Army of the Tatmadaw

By Mary P. Callahan

From a comparative perspective, the last three-and-a-half decades of military rule in Burma represent a unique and puzzling phenomenon along several dimensions. For one, military officers are typically conservative and represent unlikely candidates to implement the kind of radical social and economic restructuring that the Burmese military (the Tatmadaw) first adopted in the 1960s. For another, entrenched military governments rarely conduct free elections, as the Tatmadaw did in both 1960 and in 1990. But perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this uniqueness lies in the sheer durability of military rule in Burma. Elsewhere, military regimes seldom last ten years, much less 35. Once in power, the factional struggles within the military over the spoils of office and over the inevitable incompatibilities between ruling and warring usually lead to a return to the barracks.
Some of Burma's "Thirty Comrades" who helped to form the Burma Independence Army. Seated fourth from left, Bo Aung San and seated second from right, Bo Ne Win.
In explaining this last puzzle, scholars and other observers have focused on General Ne Win as a kind of glue that has held the Burmese armed forces and the post-1962 regime together. Throughout the civil wars, economic collapses and political debacles of General Ne Win is only one piece of the puzzle at the heart of modern Burmese politics. Another piece lies in the emergence of the Tatmadaw in the 1950s as the powerful institution that came to dominate state and society for the next four decades.

For the young Burman nationalists who would come to dominate the upper ranks of the armed forces in the 1950s, the early period of independence was one in which individual improvisation and creativity in solving the crisis-of-the-day led to the unintended — though nonetheless consequential — crafting of mechanisms that became institutionalized in the form of a modern, standing army. Following the transfer of power from Britain to Bogyoke Aung San and his successors, the army underwent at least two transformations that created the institutional basis for the enduring military rule that followed the 1962 coup.

Before examining the first transformation, it is important to note the context in which these transformations materialized. The postwar period began in chaos. In 1945, nationalist leader General Aung San and his nationalist forces turned against their Japanese allies by forming a shaky alliance with communists and the British Special Operations Executive. The result was a tenuous coalition of mostly ethnic-majority Burman nationalists fighting alongside the Anglo-Burmese and Karen troops whom they had fought against in 1942 and whom they considered “mercenaries.” Upon defeating the Japanese, these British-led forces were reorganized under conditions of considerable division both between and among British officials, indigenous loyalists, Burmese socialists, communists and rightists. Tension was rife and within two months of independence in 1948 the Burma Communist Party revolted; the Karen National Defense Organization rebelled in 1949. By this time, one half of the government troops had mutinied and nearly that proportion of the army’s equipment was gone; important cities like Mandalay, Maymyo, Prome and even Insein (a suburb of the capital, Rangoon) fell to insurgent control. At the same time, private “pocket armies” were rallying under competing politicians all around the country. Hence, by the time Ne Win assumed the position of Commander-in-Chief in 1949, he commanded only two thousand remaining troops.

That the Burmese army emerged from this chaos as the powerful force that after 1962 would dominate state and society for more than 30 years is indeed remarkable. In the throes of this confusion,
there were few signs that the military leadership (or anyone else) could even envision such a future. The Tatmadaw was but one of numerous armies that emerged at independence in 1948; many were illegal, anti-state armies but there were also quasi-legal paramilitary squads maintained by Cabinet members and other politicians in the Socialist party, which dominated the ruling Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL). The period was replete with challenges both to and within the Tatmadaw and the state, challenges often backed by arms and violence. For example, in the first decade of independence, the Tatmadaw faced a civil war waged by former classmates and comrades, a foreign aggressor backed by a superpower, and an ex-colonizer and later the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) trying to shape the army in its own fashion and for its own purposes. There was a lack of training facilities, a void of military doctrine, and a War Office administrative system ill-suited to the exigencies of internal security functions and counterinsurgency operations. At independence, the government was nearly bankrupt, and foreign assistance in supplying ammunition and other supplies had early Cold War strings tied to it that further threatened Burma’s borders and sovereignty.

THE FIRST TRANSFORMATION

Moreover, the former Burman nationalist officers who stayed in the postwar Tatmadaw found themselves shut out of control over the armed forces in the years between the end of World War II and independence in January 1948. During this time, the returned British regime reorganized the Tatmadaw from a massive, unwieldy, guerrilla-style resistance force into a much smaller standing army. Not surprisingly, by 1948, the leadership roles in this army were monopolized by officers sympathetic to the British — mainly Karens and Anglo-Burmans. By contrast, the ethnic Burman nationalists who had served in the wartime Patriotic Burmese Forces (PBF) had very little institutional clout within the Tatmadaw, and spent much of the 1945-1949 period consulting with AFPFL politicians on ways to counter their institutional weakness and create “a Burmese army worth while having.” Their memories of mobilizing twice to fight the British for independence were fresh and foremost in their minds; therefore, “rightist” British collaborators running the army, and potentially the government, represented a failure of those mobilizations. Additionally, as groups formerly associated with the AFPFL went into rebellion — including the 3rd and 5th Burma Rifles — the Karen army leadership’s harsh and ruthless counterinsurgency tactics against their former nationalist comrades-in-arms further enraged the PBF officers.

As the civil war intensified, the PBF contingent began laying the basis for the first transformation of the Tatmadaw. Initially, their strategy was to sidestep existing army institutions and to build a second army outside the Tatmadaw in the form of levies or irregular forces; organized under upcountry AFPFL politicians, these “Sitwundan” units were tied loosely into a chain-of-command emanating from the one PBF-controlled portion of the War Office under Major Aung Gyi. While these units were under formation, Karen leaders outside the army who had been pressing for political autonomy launched their anti-government rebellion in January 1949. This ulti-
However, this purge did not end the difficulties of the Tatmadaw. In overseeing the anti-Karen and anti-insurgent operations in the early years of independence, the post-Karen War Office had little in the way of the resources or skills necessary to take the helm of the highly-centralized, British-designed military bureaucracy. Furthermore, the continued presence of a civilian permanent secretary (U Ba Tint) and his staff duties officer (Lieutenant Colonel Hla Aung) who were both perceived as “rightists” sympathetic to expanded British influence in the army led former PBF field commanders and General Ne Win to simply disregard the British bureaucracy in the conduct of all these operations. In fact, a former field commander noted that Ne Win told him to ignore the chain-of-command to the War Office and instead come straight to him when he needed anything.4

THE SECOND TRANSFORMATION

This set-up was workable when the Tatmadaw was fighting weaker, disunited internal rebels. However, against the danger of the U.S.-backed KMT [Kuomintang] aggression and the related threat of Communist Chinese intervention in Burma, Tatmadaw leaders embarked on the second transformation of the armed forces: a program of institution-building in the mid-1950s with the objective of imposing a “modern,” bureaucratized, European-style, standing-army structure on to the array of personal networks that constituted the Burma army.

This transformation did not materialize with the 1949 arrival in the Shan State of the first 2,000 KMT stragglers from the Yunnan Province; at that point, they did not pose much of a threat, particularly in comparison with the communist and Karen threats to the Rangoon government. However, as more disciplined, better-organized and better-armed KMT units began entering Kengtung state in 1950 and receiving air-drops with U.S.-supplied arms and other supplies over the next few years, the 13,000-strong force became the major concern of Burmese political and army leaders. From the Union Government’s perspective, the Shan States grew increasingly dangerous in the early 1950s, with a perplexing array of anti-Rangoon forces — including the Burmese communists, the Karen rebels and the KMT — traversing this territory, forming ad hoc alliances, fighting against one another, and competing against both each other and the Rangoon government for resources and opium. This led Prime Minister U Nu to proclaim martial law in some of the Shan regions in 1950, and military administration spread to 22 of the 33 Shan subdivisions by 1952.

The imposition of martial law meant that the army was severely overcommitted. In addition to these administrative duties, the Tatmadaw was fighting against Karen, communist and other insurgents in central Burma and in the frontier areas. Early Tatmadaw operations against the KMT were weak and easily defeated. In 1953, the military waged its
first-ever full-scale, combined forces counteroffensive against the KMT, which was repulsed within three weeks by superior KMT firepower. According to one Burmese air force pilot who flew air support during the operation: “It was a complete disaster.”

These disasters led to calls for reform from field commanders and staff officers alike. In the first step toward reform, Lieutenant Colonel Aung Gyi formed a ‘Military Planning Staff’ (MPS). The MPS was to provide immediate advice in ‘charting a clear-cut course of military activities and in advising the Government to map the road to peace within the State and readiness for national emergency covering all aspects, military, political, social, economic, etc.”

According to an August 1951 memorandum of authorization, the rationale for the planning staff’s formation was that:

[w]e have been working mostly on an ad hoc or impromptu basis without giving much thought to coordination and correlation of different Departments of State.... We are virtually at war and what is worse a more devastating one as any civil war is [sic]....I cannot afford to wait for changes in organization and I am immediately in need of a nucleus Planning Staff...

Once established under Lieutenant Colonels Aung Gyi and Maung Maung, the MPS sent study missions to Britain, the United States, Australia and the Soviet Union. In their views, what separated the early postcolonial Tatmadaw from these "progressive" armies around the world was the Tatmadaw’s organizational weakness at the center and the lack of institutional clout and autonomy for army leadership to plan, evaluate and carry out strategy and tactics. At that point the Burma army was still a disorganized army of guerrillas. What it needed to become was an army capable of standing up to the KMT and potentially the CIA and the People’s Republic of China. To do so, the MPS completely restructured the division of labor between civilian and military leaders over defense policy, notably shrinking the civilian secretary’s sphere of control over internal army affairs. Furthermore, the MPS also terminated the contract for the British advisors to the Tatmadaw, wrote Burma’s first draft of military doctrine, and undertook the creation of educational and training institutions (such as the Defense Services Academy at Maymyo) that remain in place to today. MPS also created other organizations — such as the psychological warfare and counterintelligence directorates — that would become important tools of the post-1962 military regime. Additionally, through the work of the MPS, the army made its first foray into economic affairs. In 1951, Aung Gyi set up a NAAFI- or P.X.-style concern to replace inefficient, unworkable unit-run canteens. Called the Defense Services Institute [DSI], this operation expanded quickly into the sale of bulk and consumer goods to soldiers; by 1960, Aung Gyi and his colleagues at DSI were running banks, international shipping lines and the largest import-export operation in the country.

What is significant about the institutional innovations that emerged from this second transformation is that they were in stark contrast to the concurrent institutional decay of the other two major national institutions in Burma, the bureaucracy and the AFPFL. Similarly, by virtue of the operational demands on the army during the 1950s, the Tatmadaw was alone among national-level institutions in consolidating authority throughout territory that stretched beyond central Burma. A simple illustration of this point can be seen in the fact that by around 1954, the War Office could order locally-recruited members of its field units to move to other parts of Burma and expect that the order would probably be carried out. Neither the AFPFL nor the bureaucracy were able to do the same thing at any point during the 1948-1962 period.

The institutional innovations that led to the transformation of the army into a powerful force came out of the day-to-day decisions, whims and fantasies of field and staff officers throughout the army. Many of the projects developed in the second transformation were the ideas of then Major Aung Gyi (later to become Brigadier General), Colonel Maung Maung (considered by many to have been the architect of the modern Tatmadaw), Lieutenant Colonel Ba Than (who was the champion of the psychological warfare plans) and others; these were staff officers who were responding to particular crises and quite unintentionally created institutions.
To conclude, an analysis of intra-military affairs in the 1950s suggests that Ne Win’s involvement in the transformation of the Tatmadaw into a powerful, durable institution has been considerably overestimated. Within the chain of command, all of the above innovators worked for General Ne Win, who was Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces throughout the decade. However, while Ne Win was certainly involved in some of the first transformation to eliminate “rightist” influence in the army, his role in the more significant second transformation was minimal. At the time, he may have been Commander-in-Chief, but between scandals over his romantic affairs, foreign travel and visits to army units throughout the country, Ne Win had very little to do with the reorganization of the army.

In the months surrounding the issuance of that authorization, Ne Win had been distracted by personal scandals and their fall-out on the pages of Rangoon daily newspapers; in fact, officially he was on leave when this order was signed. Likewise, throughout the first decade of independence, the Commander-in-Chief’s name appears on many of the orders authorizing the creation of these institutional innovations, which may account for the tendency to attribute the transformation to his scheming.

NOTES

1. The AFPFL was formed in 1945 out of a national front comprised of the various organizations that had banded together to fight the Japanese. Prior to independence, the bulk of its membership came from organizations allied with the Communist Party; however, after the two factions of the Communist Party rebelled against the AFPFL government, the national front was dominated throughout the 1950s by the Socialist Party.

2. British advisors had appointed Karens as commander of the armed forces (General Smith Dun) and the chief of the air force (Saw Shwe Pyay); the chief of operations was the Sandhurst-trained Karen, Brig. Saw Kyaw Doe. The Quartermaster General, who controlled three-quarters of the military budget, was a Karen, Saw Donny. Although Brig. Bo La, army chief of staff and later minister of Defence, was an ethnic Burman with solid nationalist experiences, his politics had shifted rightward during the post-war years and he publicly supported continued British influence if not control over the Tatmadaw. Karen officers and other ranks dominated nearly all the supporting services, including the staff, supply and ammunition depots, artillery and signals corps.

3. Diary (personal) of Capt. Maung Maung, 1947; 25 May 1947 entry describing an informal meeting at the home of Socialist Party leader U Kyaw Nyo and attended by politicians Ba Swe, Ba Swe Lay, Bo Khin Maung Gyi, Khin Maung Kay and U Kyaw Nyo; and army officers Maung Maung, Aung Gyi and Tin Pe. Diary is on deposit in Defence Services Historical Research Institute.


5. The real threat to Burma was not the KMT themselves, but the consolidating Chinese Communist regime. Throughout the early 1950s, Burmese leaders worried that in the course of trying to stabilize their position in mainland China, the Chinese Communists would find it necessary to eliminate the remaining KMT located on the fringes of China, in particular in Burma.


8. Ibid.


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As a student activist and supporter of the independence movement, Colonel Chit Myaing served his country for nearly 34 years. A member of the Thanmy Tat, the military wing of the All Burma Students’ Union in 1941, he later joined the Burma Independence Army under General Aung San and fought in the anti-Japanese campaign. He never planned to remain a soldier after the war, but nonetheless stayed on in the military at the personal urging of Aung San. From 1946 to 1958, Colonel Chit Myaing was engaged in numerous anti-insurgency operations, serving as a brigade commander in Southern and Central Burma, Wa and Kachin States. Under the Caretaker Government of 1958-1960 he was given charge of the Ministry of Immigration, National Registration and Census by Ne Win and following the military coup d’etat in 1962, was named a member of the ruling Revolutionary Council. He was appointed minister for trade and industry in 1963 and retired from the army after 25 years of service in 1967. Colonel Chit Myaing was later named ambassador to Yugoslavia and then moved to London as Burma’s ambassador to the Court of St. James. He currently lives in the United States.

This interview was conducted in Washington, D.C. for Burma Debate.
CHIT MYAING • I first met Bogyoke Aung San when I was in college. I was already a member of the All Burma Thamani Tat, that is the military wing of the All Burma Students' Union. Bogyoke Aung San was at that time the secretary-general of the Dobama Asi-ayone [nationalist association]. In 1939 he was to deliver a National Day speech at Khattiya in southern Burma. He asked three of us Thamani leaders to accompany him, but we were not supposed to say anything, only he was going to speak. He wanted us to study. So the three of us — myself, Bo Yan Naing (aka Ko Tun Shein) and Ko Maung Maung, both leaders of the Thamani Tat, accompanied Bogyoke Aung San to Khattiya. He delivered his National Day speech and then we spent the night together and came back to Rangoon the next day.

Bogyoke Aung San guided the leaders in those days, with others like Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, Thakin Mya and U Nu, U Kyaw Nyein and U Ba Swe. Those old Students' Union members were always visiting the Students' Union building. When they had very secret meetings — usually held about midnight, planning for their movement against the British — I and Ko Maung Maung were asked to be "lookouts" for the police. That group was known as the "inner circle" — people who were planning to take up arms against the British government when the time came. If there were going to be any police raids we were to hold back the police so that the people meeting could escape by the back windows. That was how I came in touch with those people who were leading the movement during the British days.

When General Aung San entered Burma with the Burmese Independence Army (BIA) in early 1942, I joined. The BIA was reorganized as the Burma Defense Army (BDA). I stayed on because I wanted to fight for Burma's independence. In 1942 I was about 20, still very young, but after my training at the Burma Army Officers Training School at Mingaladon, I was commissioned and became a 2nd lieutenant in early '43. There were twenty other junior officers like me in the 2nd battalion and when a post of company commander became vacant about two months later, I was appointed company commander. In 1944 we had to move from Rangoon and I was placed in charge of the area from Prome to Rangoon. I was in charge of these three districts, Insein, Tharrawaddy and Prome for more than a year before we turned against the Japanese. My main responsibility was to organize the people of that area against the Japanese. Everything was done in secret. Outwardly the people saw us as garrison units, but in fact, we were trying to organize the anti-Japanese movement.

CM • What about Bogyoke Ne Win at that time?

CM • Bogyoke Ne Win was then a colonel and the commander-in-chief of the Army. During the Japanese days Bogyoke Aung San became the minister for war, nowadays we call such a position defense minister. Bo Let Ya [one of the 30 Comrades] was also a colonel and deputy war minister. Colonel Bo Ze Ya was the chief of staff to General Aung San. General Aung San was the head and he had three main lieutenants — Bo Ne Win, Bo Ze Ya and Bo Let Ya — all of them with the rank of colonel. And Burma was organized as three military zones during the war. The northwestern command had its headquarters at Mandalay under command of Bohmu Ba Htoo, a major. The western command under the command of Bohmu Aung, also one of the 30 Comrades, with headquarters at Pyalo near Aunglan. I was under the command of Bohmu
Aung and I were operating within the western command. The third zone, Rangoon, was commanded by Bogyoke Aung San himself.

In early 1945, Bo Sein Hman and I went down to Rangoon to meet Bogyoke Aung San to get detailed instructions for our western command. At that time Bogyoke was not quite sure who I was, so he asked Bo Sein Hman: "Sein Hman, who is this fellow?" Bo Sein Hman said, "Chit Myaing, Bogyoke." Then I think he must have remembered me and before the meeting ended he said, "Chit Myaing, you are going to be commander of Tharrawaddy military district when the anti-Japanese campaign comes and you will be commander of the 107th battalion." He added: "Sein Hman, give him a promotion and make him a captain." So I became a captain under orders of General Aung San.

During that meeting General Aung San also said: "Our anti-Japanese campaign will go on for maybe three years or maybe 30 years. Nobody knows. You could get killed, or I could get killed. I have complete faith in you, that's why I'm making you commander of Tharrawaddy district and of the 107th battalion. Don't expect any instructions from me or anybody else. You are going to operate independently." Those were the instructions he gave me.

The original plan was to begin our anti-Japanese campaign on the 2nd of April, but in the meantime Bogyoke also instructed us not to become prisoners of the Japanese. If the situation in my own area worsened and if I felt the Japanese were going to take the initiative, I didn't have to wait for any instructions from Bogyoke Aung San. I could launch my offensive anytime I thought fit. That was the kind of general instruction given to us.

The situation in Pegu district worsened. The commander of that area was Bohmu Kyaw Zaw, also one of the 30 Comrades. He thought he could not wait for the 2nd of April. He suggested we move the date to 27th March. It was all in such a hurry some units didn't even know that we were to begin our anti-Japanese campaign. Fortunately I learned about the change on the 26th and we were ready because we had been preparing for that operation for more than a year. So on the 27th of March, 1945 we turned against the Japanese and launched simultaneous raids on all the Japanese positions in Tharrawaddy district under my command.

**BD** • Could you discuss the period after the liberation from the Japanese to the time of Burma's independence and how the Tatmadaw evolved during that time?

**CM** • During the anti-Japanese campaign we were very successful. Before the Burmese patriotic forces were disbanded, General Aung San stopped by at my headquarters at Minhla in Tharrawaddy district, on his way to Rangoon. He congratulated me. I started as a company commander and at the close of the war I was already a battalion commander with many people under my command whom I recruited and trained while fighting against the Japanese.

When Gen. Aung San first appointed me battalion commander, he asked me whether I had any questions. So I said, "Yes sir, you have made me battalion commander, you have given me a double promotion but I only have one company under my command, am I going to get more people to make a battalion? How am I going to get the arms and equipment needed to equip those people?" The only instruction he gave me was: "Chit Myaing, I have confidence in you. You have your mouth, you can talk. You can organize people and get the young Burmese people to join your forces. You have very good training, make them good soldiers. Train them yourself." So I did what he said. By the end of the anti-Japanese campaign, my battalion was the strongest and the best-equipped. When Aung San saw my battalion he was very pleased and congratulated me. My battalion fought very well against the Japanese.
My intention was to fight for Burma's independence, that's all. I had no personal ambitions. So at the close of the war I stayed away. I never thought of joining the post-war Burma Army. I didn't come to Rangoon to report for duty. Later in the second half of November 1945, I came down to my in-law's in Rangoon with my wife. My father-in-law said, "A man called Bohmu Aung has been looking for you. Who is he?" he asked. "Oh, he was my boss, my zone commander during the war," I said. My father-in-law said: "Oh, he has been coming so often to look for you, saying he couldn't find you anywhere. You need to go and see him." I went the next day and Bohmu Aung told me that Bogyoke Aung San wanted to see and that I should go and report to him. I said that I didn't even have a pair of trousers, I had given away everything. I was so fed-up with the military. I didn't keep anything. All my uniforms, swords, pistols, everything was given away. So he went into his bedroom, he brought a shirt. He said, "Chit Myaing, wear this when you go to see Bogyoke Aung San. Go to Thein Nyunt — he's about the same size as you — you might borrow a pair of trousers." So the next day I went to see General Aung San, wearing someone else's shirt and trousers. Of course with slippers on. I didn't have any shoes. And I had a cork hat — Burmese 'phau' hat on my head. I didn't look like a military officer.

As soon as General Aung San saw me he said, "Sit down. Chit Myaing, I've been looking for your name in a list given to me of officers who want to volunteer for the post-war Burma Army. I don't see your name. That's why I asked Bo Aung to look for you. Where have you been? What have you been doing?" I told him "Well, Bogyoke just whiling away my time. I don't know whether I will go back to college or whether I will try to do some business to earn a living. I'm married. I have a wife. I have a family to support. I have my son already." He asked me why I wasn't planning on joining the army. I said: "The war is over, the British are back and we don't know whether we are going to obtain our independence. I fought for Burma's independence but since I'm not sure of getting independence, I don't see any reason to join the army. I'm not interested in serving the army anymore." He went wild and said, "Chit Myaing, you said we are not going to get independence. I agree with you. That's why I want you to be back in the army. I need men like you to join their forces, get their training and take their arms, and if necessary, fight against them one day for Burma's independence. You just go inside, register your name for the new Burma Army," he said. So I didn't have any choice, you see. It was an order.

I went to the officers testing team next door. I just signed up and I was asked to come back the next day for an interview and was selected to become an officer in the post-war Burma Army.

Twenty-seven of us who were to be the nucleus of the post-war Burma Army were commissioned as 2nd lieutenants on the 15th of December 1945. When the Burma Army came into being on the 1st of January 1946, Bo Let Ya was appointed deputy inspector general with the rank of colonel. Kyaw Zaw, Ne Win and Ze Ya were posted to the 3rd, 4th and 5th Burma Rifles as second in command with the rank of major. The rest of us were promoted to captain and assigned to the 3rd, 4th and 5th Burma Rifles. I was among the seven assigned to the 3rd Burma Rifles under Major Kyaw Zaw. I think after Major Kyaw Zaw, the next senior was Bo Sein Hman. But Bo Sein Hman left the army early. He quarreled with one British officer, resigned and joined the People's Volunteer Organization [PVO].

The People's Volunteer Organization was formed by Bogyoke Aung San with those who were not willing to join the post-war Burma Army but who were with the patriotic forces during the war. Aung San's idea was to train
those people and to use them as armed forces personnel if necessary, to fight against the British for independence. Bohmu Aung my former commander during the anti-Japanese war, was head of the PVO and Bo Sein Hman became number two there. Bogyske Aung San asked us, the officers who went into the post-war Burma Army, to support the PVOs with whatever funds we could. Those were still British days and as officers we received very good pay. So in the 3rd Burma Rifles Bohmu Kyaw Zaw who was our Burmese boss, we had British officers also, asked me to collect funds from other officials at the beginning of every month for the PVO. But the British were also watching and they thought I was a communist. In fact, I was a staunch anti-communist, but they thought that because I had been going around from company to company and collecting funds. Also, whenever we thought of planning something against the British, I always offered my company headquarters for a place to meet.

In July of 1947, when we were sure of regaining our independence, Bogyske Aung San wanted to know whether we could run the army ourselves or whether we should retain some British officers as our advisors. So he called a meeting of officers on the 10th of July 1947, nine days before he was assassinated. It was a Thursday. He asked the battalion commander designates from each of the three battalions, Majors Kyaw Zaw, Ne Win, Ze Ya and three captains, including myself, to see him. Kyaw Zaw asked me to come with him. We met with Bogyske Aung San on the 10th of July in the very room where he was assassinated nine days later. He looked very tired, but I think he was in the best of moods. He had the defense secretary, U Ba Tint, with him. I was with Bo Kyaw Zaw and Bogyske asked us whether we could continue without the British officers after independence. We were very confident. We said, "Bogyske we were first trained by the Japanese and then we had three years of war experience and so we do not need any British officers to remain with the Burma Army as advisors after independence."

CM • I think I must give you a little background about the political situation in the Burma Army.

During the war, when we were preparing for a long struggle for independence, Bogyske Aung San thought we officers needed to have political convictions. He encouraged us to study politics. As a result of that, some of our officers became socialists, many others became communists, and yet many of the rest like myself who did not join any party just became, according to them, people of blind faith.

When insurgencies occurred in Arakan towards the end of 1947, the Arakan Force was formed with Colonel Kyaw Zaw as Force commander. He had the 1st Chins, 3rd Burma Rifles and the 5th Burma Rifles under command. I became acting commander of the 3rd Burma Rifles in February of 1948 with Major Thaung Kyi as my second in command. Major Ye Htut was one of my company commanders.

In mid-1948 when the communist insurgencies spread to the Burmese areas of Southern Burma, the government sent minority battalions to suppress the movement. Government forces used excessive force. They used scorched earth policies. They shelled villages with mortars and artillery, thus killing many innocent men, women and children. On entering villages they shot everyone found still alive. They burnt down villages. They did not even spare Buddhist monasteries and Buddhist monks. When the Burmese battalions learned about these atrocities, the officers started to complain. The Defense Minister called a meeting of senior Burmese officers to Rangoon to find out why the Burmese officers were criticizing...
the government. The Burmese officers attending the meeting were led by Brigadier Ne Win, commander of Northern Command and Lieutenant Colonel Ze Ya, general staff officer, grade 1 at the War Office. Ye Htut and I were also at that meeting.

The officers criticized the government for not being able to maintain unity within the political parties. The defense minister suggested that we should also try in our own way to get political parties together. With the permission of the government we formed what we called the "Group of Nine." I was one of the nine. Ye Htut was there too. Our aim was to get the White Flag communists and the White Flag People's Volunteer Organization which had already gone underground to get back above ground, and to cooperate with the AFPFL. The Group felt that Bo Let Ya should not be the defense minister. His actions had created a lot of misunderstanding in the Army. The Group asked the Prime Minister to fire Bo Let Ya and he agreed. For most of the members of the Group the question of who should succeed Bo Let Ya was immaterial. Either Brigadier Ne Win or Lieutenant Colonel Ze Ya could be the next minister. However, without the knowledge of the rest of the Group, Bo Ze Ya went to the Prime Minister and told him that he was the natural choice of the Group. When Bo Ze Ya's treacherous action was known, the Group decided to expel Bo Ze Ya. The unity within the Group disintegrated.

When disunity started among us, the government began to test their strength. The authorities asked Brigadier Ne Win to return to Maymyo to resume his duties as commander of North Burma. The group told Brigadier Ne Win to ignore the order. "The government would not dare to touch you as long as we are behind you. We are with you 100 percent, don't leave Rangoon," we told him. When the authorities became convinced that they had no power to force Brigadier Ne Win back to Maymyo, they took the easy way out, appointed him vice chief of staff and posted him to the War Office. Ne Win became our undisputed leader. I kept in touch with him almost daily.

Then divisions began to emerge within our group. The People's Volunteer Organization and the Burma Communist Party (BCP) began to infiltrate. Bo Ye Htut began to bring in communist officers like Bo Thein and others, first as observers. PVO leader, Bo La Yaung, one of the 30 Comrades, also began coming as an observer. The PVOs and the communists started persuading the army to take over power, but we refused. I explained that to seize power was not a problem. With my battalion in charge of most of the important installations in the area, it could be an easy job. But we just could not lead the country. We could not form a government. We just did not have the experience to govern. I remember Bo La Yaung saying, "Nyilay
Bo Ye Htut, my commanding officer, tried to persuade me day and night to agree to a military take over. I objected. When he knew he could not convince me, he asked me to meet U Thein Pe Myint, a prominent above-ground communist. He wanted to bring U Thein Pe Myint to see me at the 3rd Burma Rifles. I refused to meet him. It was crucial for Bo Ye Htut to get my support. He had no control over the battalion. I was in complete control of the unit as I had been with it since it was first formed in 1946.

One day, Bo Ye Htut asked for my permission for him to talk to all the officers — warrant officers and non-commissioned officers — at the Officers Mess Hall. He needed my permission because he could not assemble the officers and men without my consent. He said he wanted U Thein Pe Myint to explain the political situation to my officers. I told him, I could not allow U Thein Pe Myint to talk to my people alone. If they were prepared to have a debate, I would also bring Brigadier Ne Win. He said he didn't want to bother the Vice Chief. In that case, I said, I could not allow U Thein Pe Myint to talk to my officers. Bo Ye Htut then said he would talk to the officers himself, which I agreed.

On the evening of Aug 9, 1948, I assembled all the officers, warrant officers and non-commissioned officers of the Burma Rifles at the Officers Mess Hall at Mingaladon. Bo Ye Htut took the floor first. He explained the need for the military to take over power at that time. When my turn came I explained that the Tatmadaw's role was to defend and protect the democratically-elected government. It was wrong to abuse the power and authority entrusted to the Tatmadaw. As we entertained questions by the members of the audience, the debate went on and on. It was about midnight and we got a call from Brigadier Aung Thin, commander of South Burma Command. He wanted to see Bo Ye Htut at his residence. Bo Ye Htut dared not go. He asked me to go and see Brigadier Aung Thin on his behalf and to report back after I had seen him. He would keep waiting for me in his office.

I found Brigadier Aung Thin with Col Tun Sein of the Union Military Police (UMP), Major Lasham Yaw and another officer from the 2nd Burma Rifles. As soon as he saw me, Brigadier Aung Thin asked me whether we were preparing to seize governmental power the next day. He said he had received information about our plans to take over power the next morning. I assured him that there was no plan by the 3rd Burma Rifles to seize power. I told him if he did not believe me I could stay with him as a hostage and he could kill me the next day if there was a military takeover by my unit.

Mrs Aung Thin intervened. She said, "You know Bohmu very well. How could he lie to you? Please accept his assurances. Let him go. It's getting very late." Brigadier Aung Thin let me go.

I went back to my unit and found Ye Htut still waiting for me in his office. He said he had assembled his officers and men at Bo Thein's house, all waiting to hear from me.

There, I found U Thein Pe Myint, Bo Ze Ya, Bo La Yang, Bo Aung Naing, Bo Thein and many others... about 20 to 25 altogether. Bo Ye Htut asked me to explain to his officers what I had heard from Brigadier Aung Thin. I explained. They said authorities could not know their plans. I said they even knew about Bo Thein's instructions given to the Transport Company to have the vehicles ready early the next morning. They asked Bo Thein whether he had given such instructions. Bo Thein confirmed that he had. They all blamed Bo Thein.
All the men blamed Bo Ye Htut for his wrong reading of the situation. They were under the impression that the whole of 3rd Burma Rifles was behind him. Now that I was not even with him, they asked him what support he actually had. Bo Ye Htut said, “About 25 to 30 men.” Everybody said abusive words to Bo Ye Htut. Ye Htut did not reply.

Although both Ye Htut and I believed that there could be no more than 25 to 30 who actually wanted to go with him, his officers went around the companies, shouting to the men to board the trucks, saying “Come on, get onto the trucks; Bohmu Chit Myaing is with us!” Many of the men believed that I was also with Bo Ye Htut and just boarded the trucks. So, there were over one hundred fifty who left with Bo Ye Htut. When we made the final count later in the day, to my disbelief, I found out that many other ranks whom I thought trustworthy were gone, including my driver and my personal orderly. Many others came back the next day and reported that they had gone thinking that I was also going underground.

The group kept trying to persuade me to join them. I refused. Without me, they did not know what to do. I told them that if they did not act then and there, they could all be prisoners by day break. It was already about 3 a.m. I explained to them that there was not much time left. They had to decide then and there. If they waited they would be court-martialed. The only punishment for high treason was death. I did not like to see them put to death. I wanted them to fight for what they believed.

It was nearly daybreak when I arrived home. I took my car out and drove straight to Brigadier Ne Win’s house to explain what had happened. The General remarked, “Now we know who is black and who is white.” From there Bogyoke and I went to Prime Minister U Nu’s residence. We had to wake the Prime Minister. We reported the situation to him and I explained that in the past, when a portion of a government unit (police or military police) had gone underground, the government disarmed the remainder of the unit that stayed behind. I advised him not to treat my battalion that way. We did not join the communists because we were loyal to the democratically elected government. However, if the government decided to disarm us, we would not tolerate it. It could mean disaster. The Prime Minister told me not to worry. He advised us to report the situation to U Kyaw Nyein who was at that time the minister for home affairs. When we arrived at U Kyaw Nyein’s residence, we found U Ba Swe and Bo Aung Gyi of the socialist party also waiting to hear from us. U Kyaw Nyein asked who was the brain behind Bo Ye Htut. I said that is was U Thein Pe Myint of the communist party...

That day August 10,1948, if I had decided to join Bo Ye Htut and Bo Ze Ya, the 3rd Burma Rifles could have easily taken over U Nu’s government.

The Caretaker Government

BD • Towards the end of 1958 U Nu resigned his post and proposed to Parliament that General Ne Win be appointed the new prime minister. Can you tell us about those years of the military “Caretaker Government?”

CM • Yes, but if I am to talk about the Caretaker Government I should discuss how the situation occurred.

As you already know, the senior officers of the Tatmadaw and the political leaders had been working together in our struggle for independence since before World War II, but we in the military felt that most of the political leaders were more interested in their positions and power than keeping the country united. They just could not agree on how to solve the nation’s problems. Soon after independence, the communists went underground, then the general insurrections started in 1949. It was the mem-
and the other faction by U Ba Swe and U Kyaw Nyein. The army was very angry. At that time, U Nu made a very big mistake. When his colleagues started quarreling, instead of trying to bring the two factions together, he encouraged them to split up. He was Prime Minister. He was the president of the national party, but he let it split. In his broadcast over the radio U Nu said, "If we are to split, let's do it at this Nyang-nyan-pin-sakhan [juncture]."

I was very upset when I heard this speech over the radio. Many people also agreed that when the party in power splits, chaos follows in the country. Nobody had the strength to form a government. Then U Nu wanted to have a parliamentary election. The army was not happy with what was happening in the country. I myself felt some of our people wanted to go in.

BD • Do you mean join the politicians?
CM • No, to take power. In that respect, again I must admire U Nu. He was very diplomat. Instead of letting the army take power by force, he tried to hand over power legally.

BD • Through the democratic process?
CM • Yes, through a democratic process... through parliamentary action he enacted a law to hand over power to the military for a period of six months, to bring peace and hold an election. So General Ne Win was asked to become prime minister of the Caretaker Government. He said to us: "Well, I have to be prime minister for six months. My ministers will be those senior civil officers, but I need some of you to help me. I want you, Bo Chit Myaing, to come down to Rangoon. And you, Tun Sein, and you, Kyi Win." He named three of us to come down to Rangoon to help him in the Caretaker Government. We were the first three to go down to Rangoon. And of the three of us, he said, 'Bo Chit Myaing, you help in the administration; Kyi Win, you help in the production side.' Bogoye asked Bo Tun Sein to take over Rangoon as mayor, and to make the city very clean, to bring it to the standard of a national capital. So we three went down to Rangoon in November 1958.

I was given charge of the Ministry of Immigration, National Registration and Census. We wanted to have a national registration in the country because we had infiltration from communist insurgent groups, from the Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO), and the People's Voluntary Organization all the time.

I approached it like a military operation. We thought we had about 20 million people in the country. Bogoye Ne Win wanted records of everyone at the township, district, and divisional levels and at national headquarters. And to register and to issue IDs to everyone the age of 12 and above. That means I needed at least one hundred twenty million registration forms. I had to take photographs of everything. We didn't have cameras; we didn't have film; we didn't have chemicals; we didn't have copy paper. I told General Ne Win that with nothing in my hands, I could do nothing. I needed more time first to get the things we needed and did not know even where to get those things because nothing was available in the country. Then he said, "You go abroad and procure these yourself." But there were no funds.

The fastest way to get the materials from abroad was to go there myself and bring them back. But again, with no money, the only course left for the government was to send me to Japan where I could get the materials through Japanese reparations funds. But again General Ne Win did not trust anybody in the reparations mission. He told me those people were overcharging the government. They were adding commissions to whatever the govern-
I could go to Japan only in February. We needed more time, at least another year. When we put the case to U Nu, he agreed with us and very kindly extended the life of the Caretaker regime for another 12 months.

The Caretaker Government was running the country with the approval of the legally-elected government. Later, when we were getting more and more involved in our respective jobs, we needed more of our officers to help us. So we started bringing army officers into the civilian departments... the army worked as a team during those 18 months and we were successful. As director general in the Ministry of Immigration, National Registration and Census, I had to carry out my responsibilities, division by division. But there were certain divisions where normally I would not have been able to go because there were insurgent activities. With my seniority in the military and with the cooperation I was getting from the various units, however, I had no difficulty in obtaining the military support to carry out my operations. In other fields also — whether in military operations against the insurgents, opening the lines of communication, opening the transportation system, improving the railway system, improving the inland water transport system or the city of Rangoon — there was team work.

We were very successful and I believe that we had all-out support from the people because they saw results and they were happy with what we did. Ferry boats started plying by night and Burma Railways started operating night trains to and from Mandalay. I think the general situation in the country improved very much during that 18 month period. And we had the cooperation not only between the military units, but with the civilian side... with the civil administration. In Rangoon there were no small thefts or burglaries. People could leave doors and windows open at night.

I think the army gained a lot of support and confidence from the general public. Of course there were some elements in the higher echelon of the army who were not very honest. When we were preparing to bring about a free and fair election, some of our senior officers were with the socialists, and I think people also knew that. I was not happy with that kind of involvement by the military. I wanted to be away from all this election business. I didn't want to get involved.

The election date was set for February 6, 1960. By that time I had almost completed my job in the Ministry of Immigration and National Registration. I planned to go to some countries where national registration was very thoroughly carried out: Israel, Yugoslavia, and Holland. But the general said, "Why don't you go to larger countries like the United States and Great Britain also. You can study everywhere." I was very happy. I planned to leave... to be away from Burma during the time of the elections. As one of the most senior officers in the army, I just could not stay aloof if I remained in Burma. So I just left the country on a study tour.

The Elections of 1960

BD • How long did you stay abroad?

CM • About two months. I landed at Washington, D.C. on the 6th of February, the day of our general elections in Burma. I went back home after the elections had been held and as I expected, U Nu's party — the Pyidaungsu party — won by a landslide victory.

BD • Other members in the army, expected the Swe-Nyein group to win the elections?
had meetings of senior officers very often in Rangoon and the brigade commanders came for discussions and briefings. At these meetings senior officers were saying openly "Oh, we are sure we are going to win this election." They said "we." They didn't say the "Swe-Nyein group," they were so involved. I think the only two who tried to stay away from these party politics were Colonel Kyi Maung and myself.

Anyway, the Swe-Nyein group lost very badly. At the close of the Caretaker Government, the General invited us to an unofficial lunch at his residence. All of us senior officers were there. He had also invited Edward Law Yone, editor and part-owner of the Nation newspaper. He was there as a witness. After the lunch the general took us to his boat house. There he started scolding everyone. He said, "You fools. You bet on the wrong horse." I just kept smiling because I was not involved, but the army was very much involved in that. Except for the General Elections, the army did very well. We did much to improve the situation in the country and people thanked the army for doing all those things. The army also became very confident that they could run the country well. So anyway, in April 1960, after an 18-month period, the administration was handed over to the democratically-elected government... U Nu's Pa-hta-sa government, known as the Pyidaungsu government in those days. I thought everything was going to be all right.

But I think what went wrong was during his election campaign, U Nu declared that he would make Buddhism the national religion... CM • They not only expected, they worked very hard for the Swe-Nyein group! Before the elections Colonel Kyi Maung was a brigade commander with his headquarters at Bassein. We had meetings of senior officers very often in Rangoon and the brigade commanders came for discussions and briefings. At these meetings senior officers were saying openly "Oh, we are sure we are going to win this election." They said "we." They didn't say the "Swe-Nyein group," they were so involved. I think the only two who tried to stay away from these party politics were Colonel Kyi Maung and myself.

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But I think what went wrong was during his election campaign, U Nu declared that he would make Buddhism the national religion... BD • A state religion?

CM • Yes... state religion. I personally believe that was not really necessary. I am a Buddhist and even though I was in the military, I was very much involved with religious affairs in my private life. I even built a pagoda at Lashio in 1956 and another in the Hakong Valley in Kachin State in 1958. Even during the Caretaker regime I went into temporary monkhood (daun-laba-yahan) for nine days. We were quite free to pursue any religious faith we chose. We did not require a state religion. We even had different sects among Theravada Buddhism; we had the Shwegin group, Dwara, and we had the Thudama group. We had Christians, Muslims...

BD • So you feel this was a mistake?

CM • That was the mistake, I think. Before that we had never had any problem with the Kachins. I was in Kachin State for one year as brigade commander. I never had any problem with the Kachins. When U Nu, as prime minister, was about to declare Buddhism as the State religion, the army appealed to him not to do that, but he said he had no way of turning back because that was his commitment made during the elections.

We knew that there would be some opposition. I think the Kachins were very unhappy because Buddhists are a very small minority in the Kachin State. I remember the General sent Brigadier Aung Gyi to the Kachin State to explain that the army was not behind this move, that everybody was free to worship any religion of his choice. But the Kachins took up arms against the government. Nowadays, it is very easy to put the blame on the army alone. Only after the state religion was declared did they start rising up against the government. That was one of the weaknesses of the Pyidaungsu government.

Then in the Shan States... after the arrival of the KMT [Kuomintang], the central government sent more military units there; and with more military, the Shan Sawbwas [hereditary rulers] started losing authority in their respective states.
The Shan States under the British were considered separate from Burma Proper. According to the 1947 constitution, the Shan had the right to secede 10 years after independence. We believed the Sawbwas were going to announce just that in Rangoon at the end of February 1962 when they were meeting. Everyone was watching the situation very closely. We never thought that Burma would be safe if the Shan left the Union. We could not afford the Shan to leave the Union. That was one reason why the army took over.

The Revolutionary Council

BD • The army seized power on March 2, 1962. What was your role in the military take over?

CM • Well... You ask me about my role in the military coup d'état? I must say I had no role... (Laughs)... because I never agreed to usurp anybody's power. The Pyidaungsu, or U Nu's government, was democratically elected. As I have mentioned earlier, I never got involved in party-politics. I believe in democracy. I knew there was a general dislike for the weak government of U Nu in 1961, but I was never in favor of a military coup d'état. I was the only person who stood alone against the communist elements in the military who were trying to take power by coup in 1948.

I can say that after 18 months of the Caretaker Government, some of the top brass in the military became very confident, and they wanted to have another run... when they thought U Nu was not strong enough to govern the country. But as an individual, I had no power to prevent the coup d'état. And I came to know about this only a few hours ahead of time. Colonel Than Sein and Colonel Kyaw Soe wanted to come and inform me about the coup as I was the most senior colonel in the army at that time, with sixteen and a half years in the field as a combat commander. I was highly regarded in the army and they needed my cooperation, but the evening of the coup, the first of March, I was giving a dinner to a visiting Thai delegation.

BD • What command did you have at that time?

CM • I had no command. I was the vice Quartermaster General in the Ministry of Defense at the War Office, but I had only my office orderly under my command! I was due for promotion but I had already decided to retire from the army in 1962 and, in fact, I refused to accept an offer of a promotion from General Ne Win which made him very angry.

BD • How was the Revolutionary Council formed?

CM • They took over in the early morning of March 2nd, 1962. About 12 midnight on the first of March, Kyaw Soe and Than Sein came to my house. They said that they had everything ready to take over and they were just coming to inform me. I knew I could not do anything, but I thanked them for coming to brief me on the situation. I went to the Ministry of Defense as usual at 8 o'clock. We normally had meetings at 8:30. When I arrived at the meeting I found many officers already there. Brigadier Tin Pe came in carrying a portable radio in his hand, which looked very unusual. He said, "Just listen. There is going to be an important announcement over the radio from the Burma Broadcasting Service." He switched on the radio to the BBS. We heard marching songs being played and then the announcement came regarding the taking over of the country by the military and about the formation of the Revolutionary Council. There were 17 names mentioned as members of the Revolutionary Council and my name was one of them! That's how I learned about my "membership" in the Revolutionary Council, through the announcement over the radio only that morning.

BD • What portfolio did you hold in the Revolutionary Council?
CM • I was not offered any portfolio because General Ne Win believed that the military was the backbone of the revolution. He could not afford the military to fail in its specific responsibilities, and the Quartermaster General’s department was responsible for about 80% of the military budget. We were responsible for procurement of arms, equipment, uniforms and supplies for the army, navy and air force. We were very busy, and if we failed, army operations could come to a complete stop. So when the Quartermaster General, Tin Pe, had to take a post with the government as a minister, General Ne Win wanted me to hold the fort as acting Quartermaster General.

But twelve days later, on the 14th of March, Bo Aung Gyi came to me. He was minister for trade and industry. He said, "Colonel Chit Myaing, I think I need your support. I am so busy with the two ministries. I need someone to help me." He wanted me to run the State Agricultural Marketing Board (SAMB), which was responsible for earning 80 to 90% of the foreign exchange we needed.

That was how I took over the State Agricultural Marketing Board. I didn’t know anything about rice, peas or beans. I had no previous experience with such things. I was there because they wanted me to be there.

I think in about five or six months I was considered an expert in the rice business. And I can say now — from 1945 till 1997 over this period of 52 years — the State Agricultural Marketing Board had the best results in the two years I was chairman. We exported over 3.6 million tons of rice in those two years and made Burma the leading exporter of rice in the world. We had foreign exchange earnings coming in and we never had any foreign debt. The balance of payments was always in our favor. I think that success, however, made some people uneasy or uncomfortable or unhappy. I don’t know why.

Anyway, as for the leadership of the Revolutionary Council, Gen. Ne Win was the chair-

man, with no vice chairman. Within the military, however, he was the chairman of the Defence Services and Bo Aung Gyi was the vice-chairman for the Army. We also had vice chairmen for the navy and air force. But among those three vice chairmen, Bo Aung Gyi was the most senior. So everybody thought Bo Aung Gyi was the number two man in the Revolutionary Council although it was not officially declared. But friction among the members of the Council started when General Ne Win left for Vienna, Austria for a medical check up.

BD • What year was that?

CM • I think in 1962. The same year, on the 7th of July, we had student problems. There were demonstrations against the military government and the government retaliated with severe measures. Up to this day, I don’t know who gave the orders to open fire. As a former student leader, and as someone who had spent three years in the Students’ Union building before the war, my heart nearly broke when I heard that the Union building had been destroyed. I felt very hurt — even now. After that General Ne Win left for Vienna for a medical check-up. We all went to see him off at the airport. Before boarding the plane a foreign correspondent asked him who would be in charge of the country during his absence. And I think I remember his exact words. He pointed to Bo Aung Gyi and said, "He will be here while I am gone." Those are the words he said. Bo Aung Gyi would be taking his place during his absence. But that afternoon the secretary of the Revolutionary Council, Colonel Ko Ko, called me and said, "Bohmygyi, I have a problem. I am seeking your advice. I was told to issue orders on behalf of the Revolutionary Council that the General had left Bo Tin Pe and Bo Aung Gyi as two vice chairmen of the Revolutionary Council, to represent him during his absence." I said, "No. I don’t know anything about that... as far as I know we have no
vice-chairman in the Revolutionary Council and I heard General Ne Win say that 'he will be here while I am gone' pointing to Bo Aung Gyi. So I think General Ne Win left Bo Aung Gyi in charge in his absence. Ko Ko said, "No, no, no... People from Bo Tin Pe's group are asking me to issue an order stating that the General has left the two of them in charge." Bo Aung Gyi thought he was number two. And I felt the same way because General Ne Win himself had said so. From that time on there were cliques within the Council. Every time they got a chance, they kept attacking each other. Naturally I was not happy. But it did not take that long to make me unhappy in the Revolutionary Council, I must tell you! On the 2nd of April... that is exactly one month after I became a member of the Revolutionary Council, I went to Bogyoke and I tendered my resignation. I said, 'Bogyoke, I don't want to be in the Revolutionary Council or the army anymore. Please allow me to leave the Revolutionary Council and allow me to retire from military service.' I had completed 20 years service but I was still young enough to try to make a living outside. I was not yet 40 at that time.

General Ne Win said no. I could not disobey his command, but as days and months went by I became more and more unhappy. Again in the first week of February 1963, I went to him. I requested my release from the army and the Revolutionary Council. He said, 'Bo Chit Myaing, I know you are not happy. But I have very few I can count on. You are one of those. I can't let you go. Please stay on with me. I always regard you as a son or a nephew. I have been angry with you only once, that was when you refused the promotion.' So when he said that, I could not refuse. I had to stay on. The next day, I met Aung Gyi in his office. He was chairman of the BEDC [Burma Economic Development Corporation] and I was the controller of two very successful BEDC companies. So we were working very closely together. When I visited him that morning, I saw him taking papers from his file cabinets, tearing them up, and putting them in the waste paper basket. He told his personal orderly to burn them. When I asked him what he was doing, he said, 'Did you see the old man yesterday?' "Yes, I did," I said. He asked, 'What did the old man say?' "He refused to let me go," I said, 'He said he knew I was unhappy, but he asked me to stay on. He had very few people to rely upon. That was what he said.'

Bo Aung Gyi said, 'Oh, yes... he still has confidence in you I know, but he has lost his confidence in me.' I said, 'No, no, Bo Aung Gyi. You should not say that. You are being unfair. You are saying that Bogyoke trusts me but he does not trust you. No, no, it's not that way.' But then Aung Gyi said, 'Well, you don't know Bo Chit Myaing... he has just fired me.' I was really shocked! And I felt very sorry for him because we had been working together for almost a year by then and were good friends. While we were talking Bo Khin Nyo came in. He was in a very jolly mood. And Bo Aung Gyi asked, 'Hey Bo Khin Nyo, what are you here for this morning?' And he replied, 'Oh... I am going to see the General.' 'What for?' Bo Aung Gyi asked. 'Well, the old man has been calling people in the BEDC thieves. I can't bear that. I must go and argue with him. We are not thieves. We are not scoundrels,' he said.

General Ne Win might have been fed false information by the other faction, Bo Khin Nyo was going to see the General and explain everything. Bo Aung Gyi said, 'Bo Khin Nyo, don't go. It's not the time.'"'Oh... no... no, Bo Aung Gyi. I must go and see him. I can't afford to be let down by him." I said, 'Bo Khin Nyo. You don't know the situation. It's better not to go now.' So he asked what happened and Bo Aung Gyi said, 'The old man has just fired me.' And Bo Khin Nyo went quiet.

We were very sad.
Aung Gyi was involved in the independence movement prior to World War II and joined the anti-Japanese campaign under Ne Win’s command in 1945. An organizer of the Socialist Party during its formation in 1947, U Aung Gyi went on to become a key figure in the Caretaker Government (1958-1960) and the 1962 Revolutionary Council where he served as vice chief of staff and minister of trade and industry with the rank of brigadier general. Although he was seen by many as Ne Win’s number two on the Council, he was ousted in 1963 for his pragmatic economic policies and was imprisoned from 1965-1968 and again from 1973-74. He later became a leader of the pro-democracy movement and briefly served as the Chairman of the National League for Democracy before establishing his own party, the Union Nationals Democracy Party.

Through a series of open letters to Ne Win and former members of the Revolutionary Council written between 1988 and 1992, U Aung Gyi criticized the economic policies and human rights abuses of the government. The following excerpts are from one of these letters.

Translated from Burmese for Burma Debate.
DEAR GENERAL,

May 1 is considered Workers' Day by the whole world. Offices and factories are closed, government departments also consider it a holiday. There are May Day ceremonies held.

Among the celebrations, the Red Square People's March in Soviet Russia was the greatest in the world. This year, however, in Red Square there is no ceremony. I read in the newspapers that Red Square is now even rented to advertisers. At one time the Soviet Russia Socialist Republic was the strongest country in the world, it is now divided into small pieces. Not only has it become about fifteen countries, ethnic groups are fighting in each province — I can see this on television daily.

Also, the country that we copied when we drew up our constitution in 1947 — Marshal Tito's Yugoslavia — is dividing and there is fighting among ethnic groups. General, you must remember of course, the deputy of Marshal Tito, second-in-command Djilas, came to Burma and stayed for over three months as a Socialist brother. Burma was even called "the Yugoslavia of Southeast Asia."

In Yugoslavia when there were disagreements within their party they wrote a book called New Class. It describes in detail how the party members and the military officers forgot who they were. They became content with their status, luxuries and their power. They couldn't recognize the sky or the wind [Burmese for "out of touch with reality"]. Shouldn't worldwide revolutionaries be urged to take a lesson from this? As for now, he [Djilas] is still alive, and in his lifetime has seen Yugoslavia crumble.

Even if Burma isn't exactly like Yugoslavia, in our own Burmese way and Burmese manner, in your lifetime General, you might see us run into trouble.

I have heard of military dictatorships in the world, because you told us about dictatorships that you saw while you were working for your revolution in Japan. If a civilian saw a soldier while walking on the street, the civilian had to bow. As for Burma except for not having to salute, all the civilians have to be afraid of the soldiers. They have to be even more afraid of the military intelligence. Just as the people of Russia feared the KGB, the people of Burma must fear the "Burmese KGB."

The Brigadier General who is currently ruling
Brigadier General who is currently ruling Burma [the now deceased Brigadier General Saw Maung] has asked, “Who is ruling the country?” Questions such as these are on television and written in newspapers. The questions are sent in writing to government officers, school teachers, professors, factory managers, workers, political parties and political leaders. Everyone must answer. After asking those questions, if the government is dissatisfied with the answers, they will come and take you away at night. Or you might be dismissed from your job immediately. Daily we have to face these things.

Not only our party, all the parties have to answer repeatedly questions in batches of ten. They are most obsessed with our party. I am the one they are most fiercely after. As for me, since I have suffered so many times, it is as if I have become like an anvil. [Examples of questions and suggested “right” answers]

- **Who is ruling Burma?** — Brigadier General Saw Maung.
- **Based on what is he ruling?** — Based on the Tatmadaw he is ruling.
- **With what is he ruling?** — With martial law he is ruling.
- **Do you know what martial law is?** — Yes.
- **Do you know that martial law is no law?** — Yes, I know. I understand martial law is the generals’ decisions and orders, what they consider the truth.

Dear General, in this 20th century, they don’t seem to know that during the Second World War, in no place in the world did the world’s great countries dare to use martial law. Even when the fascist Japanese took over Burma, the Japanese didn’t use martial law. They formed a military junta three days after Rangoon had fallen. When the British left Burma they used it [martial law] at Htaukkyant Junction for about three days. At their return around the Myitkyina battle area they used it for a while and when they took over Burma they didn’t use it at all. Like now in the world at the age of communications satellites, some undeveloped countries use it but they allow [private] publication of newspapers. Unlike Burma there is no: “Except for the government no one should publish.”

Even when there is martial law they dare not use the words ‘martial law is no law’ [as was declared by SLORC]. Those words automatically proclaim “there is no human rights.” As a country which is a member of the United Nations, Burma’s proclaiming that is very ugly. It is like saying: “In my country I will practice the way I think, the way I want. Nobody interfere. We don’t give a damn about anybody.” At one time in Southeast Asia, Burma, despite its size, was glorified. In the United Nations and among the non-aligned countries the gaungbaung [Burmese men’s headdress] was flapping. Burma held its head high. It was one country that was respected by the world. You General, more than anyone else, know this to be true.

As for now, Burma is suffering embarrassingly from accusations in the United Nations for violating human rights and torturing and arresting politicians. Over 170 countries in the world are accusing Burma’s Tatmadaw of being cruel, violating human rights, and torturing Muslims. In the UN there are no countries anymore that will stand on Burma’s side and defend her. The United Nations Security Council has accused Burma of violating human rights. Among them there are the “Big Five” [permanent five countries of the Security Council]. From among them, China said it won’t take the side of either Burma or Bangladesh. This was said by the Chinese foreign minister to Iran’s foreign minister. If it gets to the point of voting, since China stays in the middle and won’t vote, Burma is likely to lose fourteen to zero. If that happens, even those who don’t know where Burma is, will say, “Burma’s military government and its military are really bad.” I am sad to think that our future generations will not dare to hold their heads high in the world.

Dear General, in this situation there is no one who can save the country except you. The whole Burmese race has been floating in the world’s spitoon because Brigadier General Saw Maung is ruling the country by martial law. In a few days and months the world will record the Burmese military as the worst and most cruel military in the world.

Those who are bearing these major responsibilities now are appointed by you. Brigadier General Saw Maung is appointed by you. General Than Shwe is also appointed by you personally. General Khin...
Nyunt is also appointed by you. Every soldier and officer knows that the father of Burma’s Tatmadaw is you. They have no one but you to depend on. However many [soldiers] die countrywide, nobody respects them like before. Every soldier and officer knows that the whole country hates the army.

Lots of top officers have become very rich. The whole country knows that they are doing business with business people (black market), drug dealers, and contractors in order that their sons and grandchildren will have more than enough. You must have had your ears full of this news. You must have heard that after their Phaunggyi training [mandatory ‘boot camp’ training for civil servants] teachers and professors were purged. You know that secretaries and employees were asked thirty-three questions and, depending on [SLOCR’s] mood, they were fired. I have never seen military dictators doing whatever they want to do to this extent, even under Japanese military rule, or under British military rule.

Dear General, the Tatmadaw’s name is not only bad in the world but also in Burma. It will be more correct if I say it is very bad. Our Tatmadaw is the Tatmadaw which counter-attacked when Rangoon was two fingers away from falling. We fought countrywide. We fought at every border.

...Only now why are people running away by tens and hundreds of thousands toward Thailand, China, India, Bangladesh? I want you to know. Ask the brigadiers. It must be because there are some basic deficiencies that force them to run to other countries and take refuge. Before didn’t they always come to the shade of the Tatmadaw and the area where there [was] Tatmadaw influence?

...What I have heard is that during military operations when they march in columns, they have to conscript porters. We did this a long time ago too. When we did this, some regiments inflated the numbers. We looked for funds for the regiment. Those officers who are responsible for the conscription of the porters conscripted more than required, then released those who paid them off. This was done more or less during our time.

But now, roads are built in the villages. Between one village and another, one city and another, main communications roads are built. Railroads are built. Drains and small dams are built. For this captains have to recruit "volunteers." For instance, in Moulmein, the KNDOs take into the army whichever young Karens are of age. Over twelve years of age they take them. The [Burmese] army concripts porters. In upper Burma I heard they even come down to Mandalay and conscript porters. You investigate whether it’s true or not.

I heard from Mandalay that even two followers of the Sayadaw of Mingun’s Tipitaka [senior abbot of a monastery] were conscripted and the Sayadaw had to bail them out. Investigate whether it's true or not. People from the villages have to flee to avoid this. In Moulmein, in fact, only old men, old women and children remain in the villages. To build roads and to carry earth, people are conscripted according to household lists [that control and keeps track of residents]. Those who cannot go along, those who cannot dig holes, will have to hire someone to take their place. Now, one earth hole "costs" about 400 kyats. It is the same in Kayah State.

In places that produce agricultural products such as rice, sesame and ground nuts, people have to sell at a set price to the government according to their acreage. In the districts, these orders are given by army captains in competition with each other. In some central parts of the country committees are formed, I have heard to confiscate [produce grown] along with the police. It is said that this was in the Mergui area. In some areas that produce rice, there were not enough people during harvest, so the rice grains fell on the ground [were wasted]. I have heard that most of the places that do not yield a lot of rice can’t even buy enough rice to meet their quotas... They have lost their economic balance and most people have run away. I have heard that they ran away because they couldn’t bear these sufferings any more.... You can investigate how much of this is true.

Even though you may say that you have no right to ask anybody in this army since you are retired, there is no one who would dare to disobey you. In this age, living conditions are very difficult. One plate of fried noodles is Kyat 40. One citrus fruit is Kyat 35. One cup of tea is Kyat 7. Talking about the least, one piece of pea fritter or bootli [fried gourd] is Kyat 2.50. One jackfruit pod is Kyat 2. The rate of inflation rises faster than the increase of salaries for government salary earners.
I am reporting these things generally so that you know, General.

You must know that our UNDP [Union Nationals Democracy Party] party was decertified of its legal status... on March 19th, our party was dissolved. Our party stood proudly on the side of the Tatmadaw when, in the whole country, there was no one to stand on the side of the Tatmadaw and speak up for it; we didn't transgress the Tatmadaw even in our minds. During the elections we won only around 250 to 300 seats. Because of just one thing that we said — not to transgress the Tatmadaw — the whole country called us "the disgusting party."

Since we broke from Daw Aung San Suu Kyi over removing communists, our party suffered frightfully from the punishment of the country... Our party is one that went all over the country, eating our own food at our own cost, campaigning that we trusted [the Tatmadaw] and that there would be an election even when the whole country didn't believe it. Our party is one that dared to say the election will be free and fair. Our group has had no black marks throughout the history of the revolution. We have never usurped any power. None of us has ever taken bribes. You and I know this. You know who has done how much in the country.

Only now, Brigadier General Saw Maung called us dogs' fleas and bedbugs and asked us many questions. He accused us without any reason of being crooks and wanting power — [called us] power crazed people who want to become ministers; wafflers; those who trick the country and those who break up the Tatmadaw; those who are power crazy; provocateurs inviting foreign interference; those who encourage the Rohingyas. From among the Arakanese a UNDP party was formed. That party donated to the headquarters 18,000 Kyats, so he accused us of an ulterior motive of getting bribes.

As for me, he said, "U Aung Gyi, you are old, don't think of doing politics, take a rest and do religious deeds." By order of General Tin Oo (Defense Services Chief of Staff), he informed me in writing. He writes things like "U Aung Gyi can only lie to other people. He cannot lie to the Defense Services Chief of Staff." Even though I wasn't a Delta Region Divisional Commander, he wrote that I was one. "What proof do you have? Who appointed you? How many battles have you fought?" he asked.

He said things like: "You are disintegrating the Tatmadaw. This is the last warning given to you. The Chief of Staff is giving the last warning," he wrote. "U Aung Gyi, you have committed a Paunanda Kaye [sin against Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, and parents]. As a Defense Chief of Staff I...

Lots of top officers have become very rich.

The whole country knows that they are doing business with business people (black market),

drug dealers, and contractors in order that their sons and grandchildren will have more than enough. You must have had your ears full of this news.

We are not reluctant to take action against you and are giving you a last warning."

He wrote: "The Defense Chief of Staff considers you the defendants of history; therefore October 12
and 13 are the last dates for U Aung Gyi to confess and sign the following statement:

As in big parties I am responsible for subordinates’ mistakes. I understand my responsibility and when subordinates break a law, I know that action will also be taken against elders."

He asked me to reply to this letter. When I was summoned through the election committee, I went with General Aung Shwe, [and] Widura Thakin Chit Maung. The chairman, U Ba Htay, said, 'I have to say this to you because Brigadier General Saw Maung asked me to do so. There is nothing to discuss.' I replied, "If Brigadier Saw Maung as a Defense Chief of Staff would dare to take responsibility for generals and military officers' innocence, then we will take responsibility for the party members' wrong doings," challenging him. That really angered him.

...Finally, on March 12, before our party was demolished I had to meet Maj. Hla Than at the Sangyaung Police Station. This was an official summons. I was told that Col. Khin Nyo was summoned at 1:30 p.m. "Brigadier General Saw Maung as Chairman told me to give you a warning, that's why I am giving you a warning. I am giving you this last warning: if you write letters like the 41-pages and stir up the country, if you write about things like the Phone Maw Affair, the Sangyaung Affair, females raped in jail — and distribute them — we will definitely take action." I said, 'I understand and accept.'

It did not take even ten minutes, however, and I said I have something to report to the General, please report it for me and I said the following:

1) Since the government cannot accept me saying that Burma is the world's poorest country, I will never write it again.

2) In the Rohingya Affair, if the government doesn't like me saying and writing because I really see the danger that can fall on the whole country, I won't say it again. I warned them that the danger will really be big. When Col. Khin Nyo was given a similar warning there was an argument. They didn't like the way he answered.

One week after the two of us were given a warning, our party was dissolved. It is good that they dissolved our party. Otherwise they will be looking to pick on our party.

...In Russia you can see how they are working hard to get on the road to democracy. Just because the elections are over and just because we are drawing up a constitution, I don't think it will be over. The economic problem will grow bigger day by day.

As for you General, you still influence the Tatmadaw. In changing to a democratic system, soldiers, especially officers, will not like the battalions to be moved back to the barracks. While you are alive only you can make a genuine civilian government appear, only then will one materialize and there will be democracy. Otherwise, it will only be a democracy in name, which has to do whatever the army orders.

General, you are also old. We too. As for you, only when you make the last sacrifice for the country will the future of Burma be peaceful. The country has no one to depend on except you, General. Either for the future generation, or in honor of the comrades who passed away, I would like to submit to you General, that you yourself must get directly involved. You can ask of us whatever you wish.

Respectfully,

Aung Gyi
WASHINGTON, DC — The Washington Roundtable of July 22 featured David Young who had been the Burma desk officer at the U.S. State Department for the past two years. Mr. Young shared his perspective on the situation in Burma and U.S. policy toward that country.

A Roundtable was held on July 25 with guest speakers Grover Joseph Rees, Majority Chief Counsel for the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights, and Elena Broitman, Legislative Assistant, House International Relations Committee. Ms. Broitman and Mr. Rees discussed their recent fact-finding mission to the Thai-Burma border.


NEW YORK — A Roundtable discussion on June 25 entitled “The Environment and Burma” included speakers Edith Mirante, Director of Project Maje and author of Burmese Looking Glass, Tim Keating, Director of Rainforest Relief and Dr. Thaung Htun, Representative for UN Affairs for the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma. A message from Aung San Suu Kyi was also presented. The roundtable coincided with the holding of the United Nations Earth Summit.

The New York Roundtable is a periodic meeting of organizations and individuals interested in Burma. For more information contact: Burma/U.N. Service Office by phone: (212) 338-0048 or fax: (212) 692-9748.

NEW ENGLAND — The New England Roundtable of July 8 featured Chris Cox, a reporter from the Boston Herald and author of Chasing the Dragon, a book on the drug trade in Burma.

The New England Burma Roundtable is an informal group of individuals and organizations interested in Burma. Meetings are held the second Monday of every month. For information contact: Simon Billenness of Franklin Research & Development Corporation by phone: (617) 482-6055 or fax: (617) 482-6179.

SAN FRANCISCO — The Bay Area Burma Roundtable is held the third Wednesday of every month. For more information contact Jane Jerome by phone: (408) 995-0413 or e-mail: jjerome@igc.apc.org.

SEATTLE — The Burma Interest Group is a non-partisan forum attended by representatives of NGOs, business, academia and other interested parties that meets monthly to discuss Burma related topics. For more information contact Larry Dohrs by phone: (206) 784-6873 or fax: (206)784-8150.

LONDON — A Burma Briefing held on June 12 hosted Hiram Ruiz of the U.S. Committee for Refugees. Mr. Ruiz discussed his recent visit to Burma and to the refugee camps along the Thai/Burma border.

Jack Dunford of the Thailand-based Burma Border Consortium, which services the Burmese refugee population in Thailand, spoke at the July 29 meeting. Mr. Dunford provided an update on recent developments in Thailand and Burma.

The Burma Briefing is a periodic meeting of NGOs working on Burma. For information contact Edmond McGovern by phone: (44-392) 876-849 or fax: (44-392) 876-525.

HONG KONG — Information on Burma Roundtables can be obtained by contacting the Asian Human Rights Commission by phone: (852) 2698-6339 or fax: (852) 2698-6367.

BRUSSELS/PARIS — The NGO communities in France and Belgium host periodic roundtables in Paris and Brussels. For more information on this European forum contact Lotte Leicht of Human Rights Watch by phone: (32-2) 732-2009 or fax: (32-2) 732-0471.

NETHERLANDS — The Netherlands Burma Roundtable is held once every two months with the goal of updating organizations and individuals on current events and activities surrounding Burma. For more information contact: Burma Centre Netherlands (BNC), by phone: (31-020) 671-6952 or fax: (31-020) 761-3513.
I would like to define the word veteran as "experienced" rather than as "old": there are people who have lived beyond the biblical three score years and 10 without having gained the wisdom that comes of encountering a vast range of human foibles and fancies as well as the benefits of joyful human contact. One would expect to mellow in one's mature years, to gain in understanding and in compassion, to realize that while for the sake of stable society laws have to be carefully formulated and strictly upheld (tempered of course by mercy) those who seek to condemn others on an individual basis should first ask themselves that invaluable question: who can be confident that he has the right to throw the first stone? According to Buddhist teachings, those who vaunt their own virtues and belittle those of others are wicked; to seek to inflate one's moral rectitude is the sign of a mind that is far removed from true goodness. This is somewhat similar to the Christian story of the Pharisee whose self-righteousness was so much less pleasing to God than the humble man who said: "Lord have mercy upon me, a poor sinner."

Veterans, in my interpretation of the word, should have learned from their experience that there is still much to do to make this world a better place to live in and that despite their years they still have a duty to do what they can. Such are the kind of veterans about whom I would like to write today, political veterans who have not forgotten what it was that they struggled for in their youth and who are determined to do their utmost to contribute toward the building of a society that is the dream of their countrymen.

The Burmese struggle for independence could be said to have begun as soon as the last king of the Konbaung Dynasty, Thihaw, was deposed by the British and sent away to exile in India. Sporadic rebellions arose, led by men who would be king. It is not always easy to determine which by personal ambition but what is certain is that they did not manage to mobilize enough public support for their cause to throw the alien conquerors out of their country. It was only in the twentieth century, when a new generation of modern, educated, young men realized the importance of systematic political association emerged, that the real movement for independence could be said to have begun.

Those first political veterans, those who began with the organization of an political, religious society the Young Men's Buddhist Association (frankly emulative of the Young Men's Christian Association) are no more. But there are still a number of second generation veterans of the Burmese independence movement to be found today, hoary old men who have not lost their patriotic fire or their zest for political struggle. They are men who defined the might of the British empire, who fought against the oppression of the fascist Japanese Imperial Army during the war, who grappled with the problems of nation building after independence, who suffered imprisonment and exile under military dictatorship and who, now largely in the eighth or even ninth decade of their lives, are still determined to do their level best to realize the dreams of liberty and justice that spurred them on half a century or more ago. It is as though they have drunk of the elixir of political youth.

Let me introduce you to a few of these veterans. There is Bohmu Aung, one of the famous Thirty Comrades who received training from the Japanese army at the beginning of World War II. He is truly a son of the soil, a leader of peasant farmers and a member of the Dohbama Asayone, the "We Burmese" association which was founded in 1930 after serious riots between the Burmese and the Indian laborers who had been brought into the country by the British administration. Bohmu Aung also spent a few years in a monastery which provided him with a firm foundation in traditional Burmese Buddhist education.
MEDIA RESOURCES (CONTINUED)

published in the New Light of Myanmar, the official newspaper of Burma. The year-long series is highly critical of Aung San Suu Kyi, accusing her of being a puppet of the western nations. Available in Rangoon at Kyat 65.

LETTERS TO A DICTATOR
Correspondence from NLD Chairman U Aung Shwe to the SLORC Chairman Senior General Than Shwe

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This collection of 33 letters written between December 1995 and March 1997, by the National League for Democracy (NLD) Chairman U Aung Shwe, to the chairman of the State Law and Order Restoration Council, Senior General Than Shwe, documenting unlawful acts committed by the authorities against the NLD, was smuggled out of Burma and published by the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF).

BACK TO MANDALAY
Burmese Life, Past and Present
by Norman Lewis, et al.
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This briefing book will be published by the Open Society Institute in October and will provide background, contact and resource information on the most critical issues facing Burma today. Copies may be obtained by contacting OSI's Burma Project at the address above. Country in Crisis will also be available via the world wide web at http://www.swns.org/burma.html.

SLORC SPEAKS

The following press release was distributed by the Embassy of the Union of Myanmar in Washington D.C. on July 30, 1997

MYANMAR BECOMES MEMBER OF ASEAN

Southeast Asians have done themselves proud by taking a significant step toward fulfilling aspirations to unite all 10 nations of the region under a single organization. Myanmar and Laos were admitted on 23 July 1997 as new members of the ASEAN, bringing the membership to nine. It is hoped that Cambodia too will be able to assume its rightful place in the near future.

The admission of Myanmar and Laos to ASEAN is a momentous event and augurs well for the future of the entire region. The very fact that ASEAN members were able to weather the storm stirred by outsiders opposed to Myanmar's admission underscores ASEAN's inherent strength. In taking a principled stand, the ASEAN countries affirmed that they have come of age and are masters of their own destiny. It is noteworthy that the two newcomers chose quiet diplomacy over confrontation and displayed professionalism in pursuit of their goal and that ASEAN itself demonstrated admirable unity and vision in welcoming them as members.

At a time when the world stands on the threshold of a new millennium and when nations are often buffeted by the winds of change, who can deny that it is appropriate and wise for like-minded nations of a region to strive for unity and to enhance cooperation to promote the common weal?

ASEAN was established on 8 August 1967 to promote the economic, social and cultural development of the region through cooperative programs; to safeguard the political and economic stability of the region against big-power rivalry; and to serve as a forum for the resolution of intra-regional differences. Myanmar was invited to join as charter member but declined due to the circumstances prevailing at that time. While Myanmar fully shared ASEAN's broad objectives to promote regional peace and stability as well as economic and social development, it was constrained to adopt a policy of non-alignment to steer away from ideological rivalries. The unbridled wars in the region and the ominous clouds of war that loomed over others only served to confirm the wisdom of Myanmar's decision. At the time of ASEAN's creation virtually every nation in the region was strife-torn or was threatened by violence as a result of big-power rivalry.

With the end of the Cold War, the political and economic situation changed and the transformation allowed ASEAN to turn its faltering steps into firm strides. ASEAN has come a long way and now has an impressive record — from promoting political and economic cooperation among its members to developing fruitful relations and mutually beneficial cooperation with other countries.

...The expansion of ASEAN to include Myanmar and Laos joins together nine countries that have more attributes in common than not. These countries not only share traditions, culture and values, but are united in their vision to ensure peace and stability in the region and economic development for all their peoples. Both new comers, Myanmar and Laos, are well endowed with human and material resources and are bound to prove to be a credit to ASEAN.

In the weeks leading to the recent meeting of the Foreign Ministers of ASEAN in Kuala Lumpur, a massive campaign was mounted by the United States to keep Myanmar out of ASEAN. When the move failed and Myanmar was accorded its rightful place in the grouping, attempts were made to justify the opposition by seeking to smear the Myanmar government as repressive on the issues of drugs and human rights despite Myanmar's outstanding record against drug traffickers and in creating peace and unity within its borders.

Is the opposition to Myanmar put forth to prevent ASEAN from finding a most deserving partner?

Notwithstanding the obstacles, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers came together in Kuala Lumpur and lived up to expectations.

Hats off to ASEAN for standing tall!

BURMA DEBATE
After the war, he became a leading member of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, which negotiated independence for Burma with the British government. After the country regained independence in 1948, he held such key posts as speaker of the lower house of Parliament and defense minister. After the military coup of 1962, he was imprisoned for a number of years and later he went into exile in Thailand to fight for the restoration of democracy in Burma. In his seventies he returned to the country as part of an amnesty package. One would have imagined that after such a colorful, checkered career he would be more than content to spend his twilight years reminiscing about the past and watching his children grow up. Not so. Bohmu Aung, now 88, knows that, his duty towards his country will end only when his life ends. He and other indomitables of his ilk meet regularly to examine the present political situation and to discuss what they could do to alleviate the troubles of Burma.

Among Bohmu Aung's staunch colleagues are such veterans as Thakin Chit (the prefix 'thakin' indicates that he was a member of the Dohbama Asiayone), 89 years old and the last survivor of the party which went to London to sign the Aung San-Atlee agreement that paved the way to independence for Burma. Then there are Thakin Khin Aung, Thakin Chit Maung and Thakin Thein Pe, all octogenarians, all equally committed to playing their part in building the Burma that is the dream of all right thinking citizens. There are some relatively younger members of the group of veterans, such as Boh Aung Naing and Boh Nyo, one time members of the armed forces, and Dr. Maung Maung Kyaw, a well known student leader during the early years of Burmese independence.

These stalwart veterans take a lively interest in what is the present political scene and they write to the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) whenever it seems to them necessary that the military junta be reminded of the needs of the nation. Such communications usually result in a reprisal (most un-Burmese, reprimanding men of such age and standing) from the powers that be put that does not deter our old soldiers who will never die nor fade away from the annals of Burmese political life.

The last time our veterans wrote to SLORC was on August 5, 1997. They pointed out the present political, economic and social ills of our country and professed the opinion that the only way of solving these various problems would be to adopt a spirit of understanding, forgiveness and reconciliation and to put the good of the whole nation above personal considerations and the interests of one's own organization. To that end, the veterans suggested that negotiations be conducted as soon as possible with representatives of the National League for Democracy (NLD), which received the mandate of the people in the elections of 1990. It was specifically mentioned that I should be included in the negotiations.

The predictable reaction of the authorities was to summon our veterans to demand why they had made such a recommendation, to accuse them of displaying favoritism toward the NLD, to ask them whether it was not high time they stayed out of the scene and they write to the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) to ask them whether it was not high time they stayed out of the scene and they write to the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) to warn them what action could be taken against them.

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NOTABLE & QUOTABLE

"If the people greet you with a warm smile, you are doing all right. If they look at you with hurt or hate in their eyes, you must examine yourselves and change your ways. We are the people's army; we are of the people, not a class apart."

General Ne Win, on the formation of the Tatmadaw

As quoted in To a Soldier Son, by Dr. Maung Maung. Published in Rangoon, 1974.
BURMA DEBATE

CANADA TIGHTENS SANCTIONS ON BURMA

The government of Canada announced that it will be increasing its economic sanctions against the State Law and Restoration Council (SLORC) by removing Burma’s General Preferential Tariff eligibility, requiring all Canadian exporters to Burma to have an export permit and encouraging businesses not to invest in the country. At an August 7 press conference, Canada’s Foreign Minister, Lloyd Axworthy, stated: “These actions we have taken today are intended to convey the seriousness of our concerns over the suppression of political freedoms and our frustration with Burma’s failure to curb the production and trafficking of illegal drugs.” Canada suspended bilateral aid to Burma in 1988 and since then has frozen export aid and commercial promotion to Canadian firms doing business in Burma, ended military sales to the country, and suspended its diplomatic presence there.

BURMA’S CURRENCY PLUNGE

The Burmese Kyat plummeted nearly 46 percent in July, recently reaching as low as 320 kyats to a U.S. dollar when traded against the Foreign Exchange Certificate (FEC). The FEC, which is worth one U.S. Dollar, was instituted by the government in 1995, originally as a means for tourists to avoid having to purchase the Burmese currency at its greatly overvalued official rate of 6 kyats to a dollar. In December 1995, the government declared that the FEC could be exchanged for kyats as well as dollars and it quickly became the currency of choice for many Burmese. This sharp drop in the exchange rate has now sent prices soaring in a country where some sources claim the annual inflation rate is nearly 40 percent. The government responded to the currency crisis by rounding-up local traders and businessmen for questioning, implementing a measure that caps the amount of FECs that can be transferred abroad at $50,000 and accusing “destructionists” of spreading rumors about the economy.

BURMA CATCHES "MALL FEVER"

A modern, multi-service shopping center opened with great fanfare on July 9 in Rangoon. Lt.-Gen. Khin Nyunt attended the ribbon-cutting ceremony at the Yuzana Center, a shopping, hotel and office complex owned by the Yuzana company, which has also completed a store in Bayinnaung township north of the city and will finish another complex owned by the Yuzana company, which has also completed a store in Bayinnaung township north of the city and will finish another complex in the eastern township of Mingala within the next 14 months. The $100 million Mingala project includes apartments, houses and a drive-in theater and will cover 70 acres of land that have been leased from the government. According to a company spokesperson, Yuzana will share 30-50 percent of the developed property with the government in exchange for using the land.

BURMA’S TELECOMMUNICATIONS SECTOR GROWS

According to reports by the Xinhua news service, a nine percent growth was reported in Burma’s telecommunications sector during fiscal year 1996-97. By the end of February 1997, 78 auto-exchange stations (AES) and 410 conventional-exchange stations (CES) had been set up in 14 states and divisions. This is an increase from 33 AES and 210 CES in place in 1998. The number of telephones had reached 168,399 as of the end of 1996, in comparison with 73,545 telephones in the early 1990s. Over 2000 cellular phones were issued within the last four years in Rangoon alone and 3,000 more are expected in Mandalay. Foreign companies from Australia, Israel, Japan, the United States and Singapore have been involved in the telecommunications industry in Burma.

MORE SELECTIVE PURCHASING BILLS PASSED

New York City and Santa Cruz, California have passed legislation sanctioning U.S. companies that do business in Burma. The New York City bill barring companies doing business in Burma from receiving city contracts was passed and signed into law in June, while the Santa Cruz city council passed its law providing a 10 percent bidding preference to companies that do not do business with the Burmese regime in July. These two communities join a growing list of U.S. cities, counties and states that have adopted similar rulings.

UNOCAL TO OPEN ASIA HEADQUARTERS

The California-based oil company, UNOCAL Corp., has announced that it will open a “twin” headquarters office in Kuala Lumpur in order to further strengthen its ties with Asia. The office will be headed by John Imle, the firm’s president and UNOCAL’S No. 2 executive under Chairman and CEO, Roger Beach. The move reflects the company’s shift away from refining and marketing to exploration and production. UNOCAL is currently a partner, along with TOTAL of France and the government of Burma, engaged in developing a natural-gas pipeline in Burma.

BUSINESS WATCH

U Tin Shwe, a member of the Central Committee of the National League for Democracy, died in Rangoon’s Insein jail on the 8th of June at the age of 67 from heart disease. A writer and one of the founding members of the NLD, he was arrested in 1990 in Mandalay and sentenced to 10 years in prison for his political activities. Daw Tin Saw Oo, an elected NLD representative from Mon State, died on March 14 after being subjected to intimidation and harassment by the SLORC. Only 53 years old, Daw Tin Saw Oo suffered a heart condition, which was reportedly aggravated after officers from the Bureau of Special Investigation [BSI] came to her home to convince her to resign from the NLD. The heated argument, which took place during that visit was said to result in her having a stroke and her death two days later.

Letters and Comments

The Free Burma Coalition, an international grassroots network, will be hosting its annual conference October 4-6 at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). Registration can be done on the World Wide Web at http://www.gfb.org/bfc. A Burma strategy meeting, organized by the recently established Euro-Burma office, will be held in Brussels from September 22-24. Representatives from various ethnic and pro-democracy organizations from Burma, European NGOs, members of the European Parliament and the European Commission will participate. A September 25 seminar in Stockholm will feature presentations by Dr. Sein Win, prime minister of the NCCGB; journalist, Bertil Lintner; and Byron Rushing, state representative of Massachusetts. For information contact the Sweden-based NGO, Diakonia at tel: (46-8) 453-6900, fax: (46-8) 453-6929 or e-mail: diakonia@diakonia.ac.

BRIEFINGS AND DEVELOPMENTS

TWO NATIONAL LEAGUE FOR DEMOCRACY MEMBERS DIE

UPCOMING MEETINGS ON BURMA

The Fiji Burma Coalition, an international grassroots network, will be hosting its annual conference October 4-6 at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). Registration can be done on the World Wide Web at http://www.gfb.org/bfc. A Burma strategy meeting, organized by the recently established Euro-Burma office, will be held in Brussels from September 22-24. Representatives from various ethnic and pro-democracy organizations from Burma, European NGOs, members of the European Parliament and the European Commission will participate. A September 25 seminar in Stockholm will feature presentations by Dr. Sein Win, prime minister of the NCCGB; journalist, Bertil Lintner; and Byron Rushing, state representative of Massachusetts. For information contact the Sweden-based NGO, Diakonia at tel: (46-8) 453-6900, fax: (46-8) 453-6929 or e-mail: diakonia@diakonia.ac.

35 JUL/AUG 1997
Burma Debate is a publication of The Burma Project of the Open Society Institute.

Mary Pack, Editor

THE OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE (OSI) was established in December of 1993 to promote the development of open societies around the world. Toward this goal, the institute engages in a number of regional and country-specific projects relating to education, media, legal reform and human rights. In addition, OSI undertakes advocacy projects aimed at encouraging debate and disseminating information on a range of issues which are insufficiently explored in the public realm. OSI funds projects that promote the exploration of novel approaches to domestic and international problems.

The Burma Project initiates, supports and administers a wide range of programs and activities. Priority is given to programs that promote the well-being and progress of all the people of Burma regardless of race, ethnic background, age or gender.

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