

SAO WENG

(A Shan Patriot of LAWKSAWK)

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The Sao Hpa (or) Sawbwa of the State of LAWKSAWK was without doubt the first Shan leader of SHAN STATE to clash with the advancing British Column. It was January 1887. The annexation of Upper Burma was accomplished in 1885. The Sao Hpas of Southern Shan States formed a confederacy and installed the Limbin Prince as Sovereign. First, in the Shan States, and their aim was Burma itself. With unity and solidarity they firmly believed they could drive the British back to the sea. The final aim was to establish a country with Limbin Prince as King of Burma. During that period the whole of Shan States, South as well as North was in turmoil and discontent existed.

Only five states-namely Laihka, Mong Kung, Kehsi Mansam, Mong Pan and the most powerful among them, Yawngghwe refused to support the Prince.

In the struggle for power, and to gain control of the Southern Shan States, battles were fought; wars and unrest went on for years. In the fall of 1886 only one state, Yawngghwe, remained, but the capital was being under siege by the Limbin confederacy for nearly a year. The force was about 2 to 3 thousand strong. The leader and commander-in-chief were Sao Weng and his father Hkun Shwe Paik. Sao Weng was about 40 years old, of medium height; only the eyes showed he was a gallant one, and an outstanding leader among the Sao Hpas of Shan States. Never to surrender or submit to the overlordship of the British Empire. One way or another, all the Sao Hpas submitted and accepted the British authority.

It was during the hostilities that the British Expedition force marched to the borders and stationed at Hlaingdet.

The commanding officer was Colonel Stedman of the third Gurkha regiment. As for the political officer, the choice fell to Arthur Heddings Hildebrand. Assistant political officer was James George Scott, later to become famous as "Scott of Shan Hills". In the expedition were two Mountain Artillery Guns; 250 men from the 2nd Hampshire Regiment; 50 men of Bombay Sappers and Miners and the 1st Battalion of the 3rd Gurkha Regiment. 40 mounted infantry also joined the column. The force now totalled more than a thousand men, well trained, well armed and ready for the conquest of Southern Shan States.

To oppose this modern army was Sao Weng's men. All volunteers, without proper training. Some were armed with muskets. The rest were with swords and spears. The effective range of the Shan's muskets was 250 yards only, whereas, the range of the British guns was over 1,000 yards; adding to this advantage was two big mountain artillery guns.

But these gallant men, their love for freedom and their loyalty towards their leader Sao Weng was without doubt superior to that of the British's. The Shans, fighting for their freedom and protecting their land, and the British professionals to conquer and pacify Burma.

The column left Hlaingdet on the first week of January 1887. On their way up to Shan States, they met with newly-planted bamboo spikes, and freshly felled trees blocking the trail. The political officers tried to pave the way for a friendly reception. They sent letters inviting to Sao Hpas to welcome the British. The only response was an ominous silence.

On the afternoon of January 15, 1887 the column was fired on, and attacked by the Shans and Danus in the Gegauk Valley. The British suffered no losses. Three Shans and Danus lost their lives for a noble cause. On January 19th the Shans attacked again. They lost two men and some wounded by the artillery shells, in the Pyindeik Pass. Sao Weng's men harassed the British expeditions day after day after day. They were from Lawksawk, Pwela, Pangtara and Kyaukku. Shans and Danus fighting side by side, united against the common enemy – the invading British.

Sao Weng's men had chosen the open country at Nam Hkon, put up breast works and stockades. From about 700 yards the artillery blasted shell after shell. In the British report – one shell caused eight casualties. Nam Hkon fell to the English column after heavy fighting.

On the 6th of February the column reached Heho, only 30 or so miles from the Kugyo and Bangwe forts. Kugyo, commanded by Sao Weng's father Hkun Shwe Paik with about 1,500 men under arms. At Bangwe fort was Sao Weng himself, commanding the whole position.

On the 9th of February, after midnight the English troops began to move towards Kugyo and Bangwe positions. The British camp was at Bawyethat Pagoda. The British camp was at Bawyethat Pagoda. Kugyo fort was about 7 miles from the British camp. They reached at daybreak. Sao Weng prepared for the coming battle, which would decide who should rule Southern Shan States.

The British with their advantages of guns and professional troops, attacked the stockade at once. The big guns shelled the positions, shell after shell exploded, killing the Shan defenders without mercy. The whole British infantry made a direct attack; then mounted a detour. The battle lasted the whole morning. Sao Weng had to retreat back to Lawksawk about 40 miles to the north. He and his gallant men lost the battle that day, but the British would soon learn a lesson. They would be faced with a new war: "Guerrilla Warfare". Sao Weng changed his military strategy. Small units, for quick maneuvering. At Kugyo the English counted 39 Shans dead. 3 men from the Hants Regiment were wounded. The guns and explosion wounded more than a hundred. Most died on their way back to their own state Lawksawk. Sao Weng stockaded his town, put up breastworks and prepared for the on-coming British attack. Sao Weng and the Sao Hpas of the Limbin confederates had re-affirmed their oaths to the Prince and to each other to stand or fall together. This news reached the British and it was indeed disheartening news for them.

The political officer sent messengers and letters, inviting the leaders of the confederates, especially the Sao Hpa of Lawksawk, Sao Weng, to come to a meeting and negotiate. The reply from the meeting and negotiate. The reply from the Sao Hpa of Lawksawk was simple. "Let it be known, we all are fighting for a noble and just cause. We will never surrender." Sao Weng kept this promise. He was the only leader, neither submitting nor accepting the British overlordship.

From February to April Sao Weng's men harassed the British day after day. The British outpost near Singu Village was fired upon. The English camp at Heho was attacked. Communications in the whole of Yawng-hwe and the Myelat was in an uneasy state. Outposts and Couriers were being attacked or fired upon. Any British men who dared to venture out from their camp were attacked and killed. The leaders of the Limbin were collecting men to resist the invaders – "the KULLAS".

Something had to be done, for nearly the whole of Southern Shan States was in turmoil, discontent existed and resistance was widespread.

The expedition to crush Sao Weng and his gallant men, started on April 14th. The Column set out from Ford Stedman, not direct but in a circuitous route by way of Pwela and Pangtara.

Lawksawk was ready for the invaders. Stockaded and defended by over a thousand men-at-arms, and with enough supply for months. As usual the British brought their big six pounder guns. The safety of the townspeople, women and children would have to come first. Considerations for the lives of the innocent were always in his mind and heart. He was a wise leader, loved by his men and respected by the townspeople.

He left Lawksawk with his family and some followers, and retreated to Kengtung. For, if he resisted the advancing column, the town would be bombarded; hundreds of innocent lives would be lost. Not because he was defeated, only because of circumstances, he was forced to retreat to Kengtung. His aim was to regroup, find new allies and fight back again.

His ally Kengtung accepted the overlordship of the British. He moved to China with his family and followers. He settled down in Mong Se and lived there as an independent man. He remained an exile and bitter enemy of the British Authority until his death in 1896. So died the leader of our Shan States in a foreign land. Died not as a slave, but as a hero should – “A free man”.

This is a short history of a man, one of the leaders of the Shans, who stood boldly and without hesitation against the invading British, fought an unequal war with muskets, swords and spears against a modern army.

He was fighting for a cause, a noble and just cause. He proved what is right; for “Right is Might”.

I salute his and his gallant men with these short and incomplete lines.

Sao Htao (Taunggyi)

I Ref: The Conquest, Pacification, and Administration of the Shan States by the British, 1896-1897 (by) Dr. Clarence Hendershot.

II Ref: Shan States and Karenni List of Chiefs and Leading Families Government of India Press, Simla.

III Ref: Brief Histories of the States in the Southern Shan States 1906. Rangoon Government Printing, June 1906.

Remark:

I SAO WENG

Appointed Sawbwa of LAWKSAWK by King Mindon in the year – 1866 and died in China in 1896.

II Prince Limbin

The son of the Crown Prince- Kanaung Min, brother of King Mindon.

III

i. Laihka

ii. Mong Kung

iii. Kehsi Mansam

iv. Mong Pan

v. Yawnghwe

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