

Burma Christian Soldiers Labor On

Text & Photos by Derek Melton 02/2006

My first knowledge of the Karen (the largest of the seven ethnic groups located inside Burma) was in the mid to late 1980's as a young cop fascinated with special weapons and tactics as well as the whole of the arena of special warfare. Finding their way into my hands were several copies of the Soldier of Fortune magazine, which soon became my magazine of choice, feeding my passion for special weaponry, tactics, and the men who lived the warrior's style of life. Inside the pages of the magazine, articles about the Karen Freedom Fighters and their plight at the hands of the Burmese Junta, aroused curiosity and an interest in the cause of an oppressed people, that weeks before I didn't even know existed.

Little did I know that nearly twenty years later I would be crossing the Moei River into the jungles of Burma, meeting General Htin Maung and his soldiers, the 7th brigade of the Karen National Liberation Army face to face.

In the early 1990's after 10 years of working the streets as a patrol officer, also heading up our department's special operations team, I began to bridge together my expertise in law-enforcement with another realm of warfare: the war over men's souls. As strange as it may sound, the principles between the two were similar and this cop embarked upon a journey that would ultimately lead me to the remote jungles of Burma and face to face with some of the toughest guerrilla warfare insurgents – and staunchest men of faith - in the world.

In 2000-2001 after pioneering two churches in our community approximately 30 minutes northeast of Tulsa, Oklahoma I became acquainted with Dr. Timothy Laklem, the founder and director of Asian Tribal Ministries based out of Chiang Mai, Thailand. Dr. Laklem, a native Karen, made several trips to our home over the next 5 years speaking in our churches about the Karen people and the atrocities befalling them. A relationship was formed and subsequently we began to financially and prayerfully support these oppressed but determined people of eastern Burma.

In the spring of 2005 I received a telephone call from Dr. Laklem, who was inside Burma in the jungle, inviting me to join him in Burma to reach out to the soldiers of the KNLA to encourage them and to preach the Gospel to them. I was certainly happy about the invitation but was unable to take leave from the department at the time and I told Dr. Laklem that I would have to take a "rain-check" and reschedule for later in the year. Dr. Laklem told me that November of 2005 would be a good time of year to visit Southeast Asia, being past the rainy season and into the beginning of winter.

Pilgrimage to the Jungle

At his advice we began to plan. I hand picked a team from our church that could adapt to war-zone conditions and we began to plan out the details and raise the funds to get us across the ocean and back home again. On Halloween afternoon five men and one tough lady boarded the aircraft en-route to Chiang Mai, Thailand. After 36 hours we arrived in Thailand, meeting up with Dr. Laklem and his team. We were whisked away from the airport and into the psychotic traffic of Chiang Mai - a street cop's nightmare.

After arriving at the ATM (Asian Tribal Ministries) base we took a day or so to re-cooperate from the journey and soon the real journey began. A five-hour road-trip from the base landed us in Mae Sot where we would be launching our missions for the next several days. After arriving in Mae Sot and checking into our hotel, we unloaded our gear and headed out to meet with a Major of the KNLA at his home. After a short journey we turned off the main highway onto a dirt road leading us through a thatch-hut Karen village. We came to an iron gate that opened up as we arrived and our drivers pulled through the gate and into a covered parking area. We were escorted to the house where we met with the KNLA Major and his family.

We were seated and served beverages by the Major's servants. Soon a KNLA Colonel arrived and we all shook hands and appropriate greetings were exchanged. As we sat around the Teak wood table, we listened to these officers tell of the atrocities that have been committed against their people since the end of WWII, when the British withdrew its troops from Burma. This left the Karen people to deal with the cruel Burmese dictators who had a bad taste in their mouths towards the Karen because of their alliance with the Brits, as well as the beating they took during the war.

SitRep of Beleaguered Innocents:

Story after story of these atrocities and the Karen's determination to be free from oppression and tyranny left me a little moist around the eyes. These KNLA leaders are stalwart Christians and lead their men in prayer before they lead them into battle. I sat almost spell-bound as these serious-minded warriors gave details of battles and victories that seemed too amazing and miraculous to believe - yet they were

unquestionably true. One story told by the Col. was incredible: The KNLA 7th brigade had been fighting the Junta for three months and nights inside the jungles of Burma. The fighting had been fierce and the KNLA were running out of ammunition. The mortars had all been deployed, but all that was left was small-arms and the supply lines had been cut off.

Escape On the Wings of Eagles

The Karen had high ground, but they were surrounded by 4000 SPDC troops. The Colonel and the Major rallied the men and called them to prayer - asking for God's help. The situation had deteriorated that the whole brigade was in danger of being destroyed. This battle was in the middle of the dry season and the chance of rain is slim to none. Yet, as the men prayed a cloud formed in the sky. The men seeing this prayed harder and harder and the cloud continued to grow. Soon, the sounds of thunder echoed through the mountainous terrain and soon to follow were monsoon-type rains. These 200 men of the 7th brigade formed two columns and marched down the mountain and right through 4,000 SPDC troops, who looked confused appeared unable to respond to the Karen guerilla's movement. The rain was coming in sheets and the visibility was poor, but the Karen passed within only a few feet of the well-armed Burmese army.

The Karen escaped into the jungle, leaving a confused and bewildered adversary behind, as the rain covered their tracks and escape route. During this fierce three-day battle not one Karen was injured in any way and more than 400 SPDC troops were carried out for burial.

These men are not only soldiers in the Karen Army - they are also soldiers in the Army of God. After listening to many stories of victory mingled together with hardship and oppression, I presented the Colonel and the Major a gift from the USA: each were given a Bushnell Holographic Sight for their personal weapons. Needless to say, they were exuberant and thankful. Neither had seen this kind of technology. After being fed a wonderful meal by the Major's wife we departed for Mae Sot to rest up for the next day's mission.

The FOB

The next morning we departed for the border with our team. We were met by the Colonel and the Major outside Mae Sot and traveled past a large Karen refugee camp and through a series of Thai checkpoints into the remote jungle area along the Moei River. After driving down a dirt path we came to the Moei. We were soon loading into a long-boat powered by a V-8 engine. The boat driver quickly transported us across the Moei like he knew what he was doing.

As we offloaded the boat we climbed a series of steps leading into the lush vegetation and out of the river bottom. We were soon met by men wielding AK-47's, M-79 grenade launchers, and what appeared to be Vietnam vintage M-16's. These were the soldiers of the 7th brigade. We soon were taken to the headquarter building which was made of teak wood with a leaf roof. There we met with the legendary General Htin Maung the commander of the 7th Brigade. We were seated around a table and we were served a cold Coke as Dr. Laklem introduced us to the General. We sat and listened to many stories of battles between the Karen people and the Burmese junta.

This old general was well seasoned, having served in the KNLA for 60 years. He is now 77. He is a well-groomed gentleman with a noticeable authoritative presence. He spoke to us in his native Karen tongue, interpreted by Dr. Laklem. We sat almost spellbound as this old warrior spoke of the heroic bravery of the Karen in battle. As he spoke I watched the soldiers beyond the headquarters. Many of these men were missing limbs and eyes. Young boys appearing to be no more than 12-14 years old were carrying AK-47's and M-16's. Also, there were men wielding WW-II vintage M-1 carbines alongside more modern M-79's.

Warriors only by Necessity

These warriors kept their weapons amazingly clean, many having their barrels covered to protect from moisture and dirt. They all seemed so at home in the jungle as they moved quietly around the compound. It is such a peaceful place, being it is a war-zone with the enemy troops less than 1-2 clicks away. As we sat in the headquarters listening to General Htin Maung, it began to rain. The sounds of the jungle mingled with the light rain as the General spoke and I thought: "amazing how close paradise is to hell!" The clean smells, the peace of the jungle, mingled with the generosity of these warriors seemed to be paradise to me but the reality of the hell of war is only 1-2 kilometers across the valley.

Time and again as I spoke with these soldiers, it was emphatically impressed upon me that they do not want to fight - but to live in peace. The Burmese have for years attacked and exploited the innocence of these peaceable people and the only reason they fight is to protect themselves and their simple way of life. We were shown photographs of rows of murdered Karen IDP (Internally Displaced People) children, tortured and killed by the SPDC. Village after village have been burned to the ground by the Burmese, sending the terrorized villagers deeper into the jungles to escape the brutality of these communists! After seeing these

horrific photographs and hearing the stories of exploited innocence, I began to understand why these young warriors were willing to lay down their lives fighting against a wicked army that is superior numerically and militarily. What is it that keeps this army fighting and victorious from being annihilated by an army far superior in weaponry and number? The answer is found in the heart and the resolve of these men and women, and also with their favor with God.

As Honored Guests

As the day passed General Htin Maung assembled his men and asked if I would share the Gospel with them. The men stood barefoot at attention with weapons slung across their backs and attentively listened to every word I spoke - translated by the Colonel. These men are living in such rogue conditions but their hearts are peaceable and beautiful. They were very appreciative of our being there - as Westerners are uncommon in their jungle. These men and their leaders begged that I come back and train them in small unit tactics and weapons in the future and yes - preach to them again.

We were fed a wonderful meal of noodles with vegetables and spices by General Htin Maung's wife there inside the jungle. We were treated with such respect and compassion. We visited the clinic inside the compound as well as the school. We spent time with the machine-gunner's post as they looked over maps and discussed strategies. These men were genuinely appreciative for our being there and asked for us to return to train them. The men of the 7th are eager to learn - even with their vast combat experience and understanding of the art of warfare.

Not once during our visits with the 7th brigade and the 201 battalion did we meet one arrogant soldier. Each soldier was courteous and clad with humility and thankfulness even though they are revered around the world, in the circle of warfare professionals, as the best guerrilla fighters anywhere.

Pray for Peace, Keep Your Powder Dry

The future of the Karen is hopeful. Dr. Laklem, Col. Saw Nerdah Mya, Maj. Thara Lermoo and General Htin Maung are currently leading the peace negotiations with the top leaders of the Burmese government and a gentleman's agreement cease-fire has been observed for the last 12 months. The last two negotiations led by KNU (Karen National Union) officials have collapsed, having lost the respect of Burmese leaders. Yet, Dr. Laklem reports that the Burmese are sincerely responding to the cry for peace along the Thai/Burmese border with the Karen and talks are currently underway in Bangkok and in Rangoon.

Dr. Laklem's philosophy is simple: the peace of a nation must be carved by men who hold high moral standards and who are selfless without any personal-agenda's or perverted motives. Dr. Laklem holds that there must be mutual respect between the two entities before true peace can be attained. In recent meetings the Burmese generals have asked Dr. Laklem to open the meetings with prayer. These changes in negotiation tactics are bearing the fruit of promise for peace and stability for a people that the world has forgotten - but nonetheless deserve independence and liberty. The cries of oppression from the Karen have reached Heaven and recognition and deliverance are soon to follow.

I traveled around the world hoping to help in some way and to bring hope to the people in every measure that I could. But I think I was changed by the Karen and their simplicity, hope, and faith, far more than I ever changed them. Their cause is noble and their worth immeasurable. How the Karen's plight escaped the mainstream news remains a mystery - but these hidden people that have suffered immeasurable wrong are being vindicated by a Higher Authority. The men of the 7th brigade and the 201 battalion are noble warriors with a noble cause - and they hold my absolute respect. The Karen people showed us such respect and honor and they truly are beautiful people in every dimension of the word. As we left their villages, I began to feel that I was leaving home. Now that I'm back in the USA and back to work in Detective Division and working at the churches, my thoughts are never very far away from the rogue men of the KNLA and the beautiful people of the Karen.

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