

**T**HE MOVEMENTS of  
MON NATIONAL  
LIBERATION Army.

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# BATTLE AT THREE PAGODAS PASS

Text & Photos  
by Jake Border

**I**F you trace the route of the infamous World War II Japanese Death Railway northwest from Kanchanaburi (two hours' drive west of Bangkok and site of the bridge on the River Kwai), you arrive at a place on the Thailand-Burma border marked by a trio of historic coneshaped stone and plaster Buddhist edifices — Three Pagodas Pass.

These pagodas, or *chedis*, mark the spot from which centuries ago the Burmese used to periodically romp into Thailand on their traditional invasions.

The Burmese are developing yet another tradition in Three Pagodas Pass these days, with nearly annual attacks against the Karen and Mon peoples who have carved out a tenacious, semi-autonomous existence on the Thailand-Burma border. The attacks are launched in December, allowing a month or two of campaigning before the monsoon turns jungle tracks into slippery nightmares and makes fighting impossible.

An estimated 250 Burmese from 31 Battalion initiated the hostilities on 12 December 1986 by overrunning the deserted but booby-trapped front-line Mon outpost of Kreng Thaw, about 15 clicks northwest of Three Pagodas Pass.

The insurgent Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA) soldiers left Kreng Thaw rigged with "bottle-bombs" — homemade antipersonnel mines made from dynamite and a blasting cap powered by two 1.5-volt flashlight batteries, which explode when two copper-wired bamboo sticks are pressed together. Very simple but highly lethal.

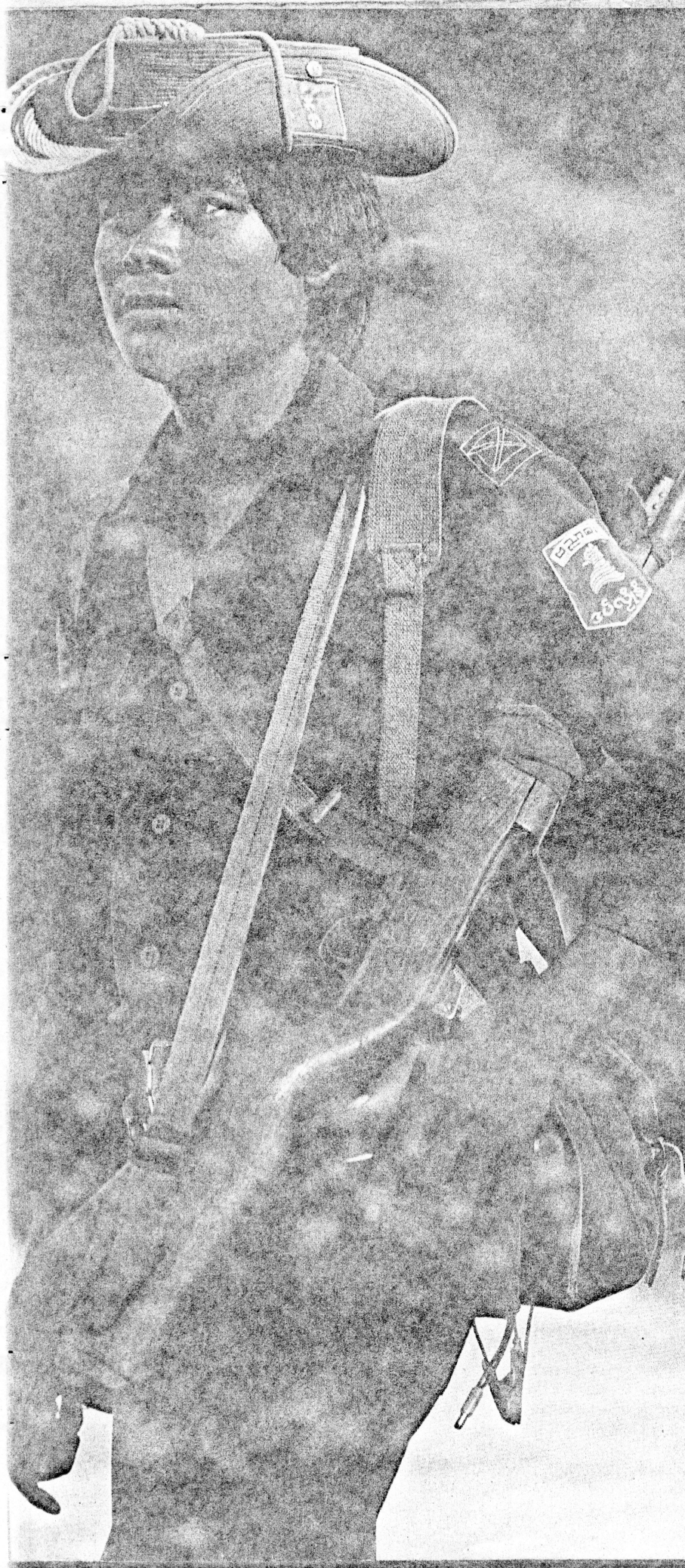
The Burmese took their knocks clearing

**LEFT: Porter moving consumer goods into Burma along the "Aji-no-Moto trail."**



## BORDER PATROL

Jake Border has traveled extensively in South Asia, and it would seem that combat is always on his itinerary. Border's previous articles for SOF include a report of his mission with the Afghan mujahideen to Kandahar inside Afghanistan ("Afghan Attack," SOF, September '86), and an account of KPNLF skirmishes along the Thailand/Cambodia border ("Cambodian Recon," SOF, October '86).



Kreng Thaw, then advanced down the rugged (but passable) dirt track to Three Pagodas township. They were held up just south of Kreng Thaw at the heavily bunkered Mon outpost of Ju-jblu, where 200 MNLA soldiers under the command of Major Nai Sai Rod put up a stubborn defense.

After three hours of fighting, the Burmese withdrew and established a jungle base on a hilltop to the west. On 14 December at 0200 hours they launched a second attack against the Mon which lasted until 0645. It was an apparent attempt at a surprise outflanking, but the MNLA had also taken the precaution of digging in around Ju-jblu village and managed to repulse the Burmese once again.

After some intense shelling from 81mm and 60mm mortars and 75mm recoilless rifles, in which the Mon suffered two KIA, they withdrew to establish a defensive perimeter around the outskirts of Three Pagodas township, a tactical move in light of a second Burmese column moving down from the north.

These Burmese were from 62 Battalion which, simultaneous with the assault on Kreng Thaw, had swooped in to occupy the undefended Karen No. 5 antimony mine about 40 clicks north of Three Pagodas. Now they were heading south in what was shaping up to be a classic two-pronged thrust.

Mixed elements of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) — Mon allies — followed the Burmese advance southward to the Mae Kasa antimony mines, 15 clicks north of Three Pagodas. Because the Burmese had peppered the trails with antipersonnel mines, the Karen were obliged to take a slower, indirect route following little-used jungle paths known only to Karen game hunters.

What happened when the Karen finally came upon the Burmese is typical of the bungling that can occur in jungle warfare. Karen commanders had gone forward to recon the terrain when the Burmese spotted them and opened fire. Karen soldiers, tired and hungry, began an angry but uncoordinated counterattack which proved inconclusive after three hours of fighting. The Karen lost two men KIA and 10 WIA, with estimated Burmese casualties of seven KIA and 11 WIA.

The 250-man KNLA force then pulled back to link with the MNLA and wait for the final Burmese thrust to Three Pagodas but, for reasons best understood by the Burmese, the final attack never came. At 1300 hours on 17 December, the Burmese 31 Battalion had advanced sufficiently to clash briefly with the MNLA, while their 62 Battalion counterparts withdrew from Mae Kasa,

LEFT: MNLA soldier Sein Myint wearing bush hat captured from the Burmese 31 Battalion.



TOP: Mon soldier with Burmese-made G3 rifle.

ABOVE: MNLA troops at Num Khok headquarters.

57mm recoilless rifle and Mon gunnery commander.



completely avoiding the track leading south to Three Pagodas. They joined up with 31 Battalion in the evening, bivouacked in the jungle, and on 18 December both units retreated to their headquarters at Akyaing near Mezali village, 30 klicks from Three Pagodas township.

My timing was just a week off. I'd written to the Mon of my intention to visit and had received an invitation to come before the end of the year if possible. I'd just come down from northern Thailand when I heard of the Burmese attack, so I raced for the border, arriving the day following the Burmese pullback.

On my first visit about a year ago, getting to Three Pagodas was a real hassle. The road ended at the nondescript Thai town of Thong Pha Phum, a three-hour local bus ride from Kanchanaburi driving parallel to the mist-enveloped Bilanktaung Ranges, whose promise of torrential rain was never broken. Here I entered into negotiations for the next stage of the trip, to the district capital of Sangkhlaburi.

A recently constructed hydroelectric dam at Thong Pha Phum had put the old town of Sangkhlaburi underwater and created a huge manmade lake, which called for a long-boat ride. The lake was eerie, dotted with islands that were once hilltops, while branches wreathed in natural bouquets of wild orchids projected from drowned trees.

Approaching "new town," as the relocated Sangkhlaburi is called, a large, deceptively archaic-looking temple arises from a hillside, conjuring images of the Khmer Angkor complex. Actually it is a new Buddhist temple for those distant cousins of the Khmer, the Mon, but it held promise of things to come.

Next day, after a welcome hotel stop, a swamp posing as a road had the vintage four-wheel-drive jeep axle-deep in mud. Two Karen women smoking pipes and packing babies on their backs glided past on foot, barely condescending to give us a side glance as we lay trapped like a dinosaur in a tar pit. Eventually, with a herculean effort, we manhandled the vehicle clear and arrived at the village of Sangkria, from where I mercifully was able to continue on foot.

Following the contraband consumer goods that porters carried across the pontoon-bridged river to waiting trucks bound for Burma, I set out for the village of Nam Khok, an hour's walk away. The contra-



Returning from the jungle, a Mon grenadier with M79.

band would arrive much later, as it was necessary to transfer it again from the trucks to ox carts at the pulped portions of the road, where I sank thigh-deep in mud ruts.

Nam Khok has the distinction of demarcating the tortuous Thailand-Burma border, which bisects this village of predominantly Mon population.

From here on it was simple, just a matter of two to three more hours of walking through the jungle, following the cuttings made by the Allied prisoners when the Japanese had them working on the now-dismantled railway line.

Strictly speaking, this route is in Burma, running parallel with the border. Due to an anomaly of the border, the three small *chedis* are situated in Thailand, or at least on the edge of a protrusion of Thailand that juts into Burma. Thus I left Nam Khok — designated the "pass" on maps — walked (in Burma) up to the three *chedis* (in Thailand), and then down a small slope into Three Pagodas township — in Burma again!

Now it is much easier to get there. Buses drive direct from Kanchanaburi to Sangkhlaburi, from which small pickup trucks carry you nonstop, on a newly constructed road, to Three Pagodas.

This time around however, because of the Burmese offensive, the pickup I was in stopped short of Three Pagodas township and parked 200 meters away, in a settlement that is currently being built by the Thais. I was handed over to the Thai Border Patrol Police, whose duties include narcotics suppression, interception of illegal immigrants and interrogation of suspicious foreigners lurking around the nation's frontiers.

The police were cooperative, and after offering refreshments and practicing their English, an officer escorted me down the road to Three Pagodas.

Before the entrance to the town I was surprised to see that the Mon had erected a signposted gate and a guardhouse. Previously there was no overt sign of the military until you were well inside the town itself.

Luckily there was someone at the gate whom I had met at headquarters during my last visit and I was welcomed inside, no doubt to the relief of my Thai escort, who returned to his side of the border. Nominally I was now in Burma.

My new escort and friend, Nai Soe Myint of the New Mon State Party (NMSP) — political wing of the MNLA — led me off to be introduced to others and to be briefed on the current offensive, but I was keen to get out to the front lines to see what was happening in the field.

A short excursion was organized and I was taken out to the defensive perimeter of Three Pagodas, where front-line commander Major Nai Pan Nyunt, whose expression never seemed to change from a beatific smile, led me through the jungle visiting Mon defenders scattered about in foxholes in groups of twos and threes. They were well-armed and dug in. Light weapons were mostly M16s and AKs, but some captured Burmese G3 rifles (H&Ks made under license) were pointed out to me. The heavier stuff included Chicom RPDs, RPGs, and a homemade two-and-a-half-inch (roughly 60mm) mortar.

Elsewhere on a hilltop were split trenches linking a U.S.-made 81mm mortar and a 57mm recoilless rifle. But this was tame stuff — how about the front line, I persisted. After some debate they agreed I could go, but I'd have to wait till next morning. That was okay, for in the meantime I had an offer from the Karen to make a trip to Mae Kasa.

We set off in a Toyota pickup along a track that was covered with talcum-fine red dust. Within minutes my sweat-soaked jungles were no longer green but mud-brown in color. We stopped short of Mae Kasa (it was now deserted) and waited in a jungle clearing. Just as I was about to start cursing this waste of time there was a snake-like rippling in the jungle undergrowth.

Next thing, the full contingent of the Karen force — 250 men — was streaming out into the clearing. The force was made up of the 6th Brigade KNLA regulars and their equally well-armed auxiliary groups: the French-trained, black-scarved 6th Brigade Commandos; the blue-jeaned village volunteers known as "urban guerrillas"; and a squad of the 786 Kawthoolei (Karen State) Muslim Liberation Force.

They'd just come down from the mountains after five days of nonstop foot-slogging and skirmishing. To a man they were haggard and weary and laden with equipment, resembling a waiking international arms bazaar. They carried M16s, Russian and Chinese-made AKs, M79s, Chicom RPDs and RPGs, M1 Carbines, Burmese G3 rifles, LAW rockets, U.S. fragmentation grenades, mortars and even one classic veteran piece, the Browning

Automatic Rifle. Though most of the men wore rubber slippers instead of boots, they all carried the regular accouterments of water canteen, bandoliers of ammo, pack, and rice ration stowed in a sausage-like stocking tied around the waist or shoulder.

They were due for R&R, though the latter wouldn't be much more than a handout of Burmese cheroots and tobacco.

Next day I got to visit the Mon front line with MNLA operations commander Colonel Nai Ong Nai, who for some reason — his beard maybe — reminded me of Errol Flynn. We trucked up to Ju-jblu and took it from there on foot. In contrast to the Karen, the Mon troops were visibly less fatigued, but then they had the advantage of fighting from fixed positions.

We were shown the extent of the Burmese advance on Ju-jblu village — their forwardmost men were only ten to fifteen meters from the Mon foxholes. I spoke with Sein Myint, a 20-year-old who cranked off 400 rounds with his M1 in the early morning battle. He showed me the position where he had capped a Burmese soldier — I measured the distance as 10 paces — and through an interpreter he added: "I saw his brains on the ground."

Everywhere was scattered the debris from the Burmese attack: piles of spent ammo cases (including M79s), numerous unfired 7.62 rounds, bloodstained boots and cloth, and fuse-pins from rifle-launched 51mm grenades. Some Mon soldiers were wearing captured Burmese bush hats with the 31 Battalion badge intact. The personal papers and a photograph album belonging to Burmese Major Han Tint, reportedly second-in-command of 31 Battalion, were recovered.

Nai Soe Myint and I got left behind the main party as it exited Ju-jblu while I was photographing an antipersonnel mine laid by the Burmese but retrieved intact. As we left to catch up with the others, we were prevented from taking the main track and directed to the side-paths. "Mines," they explained. Sure enough, the old Dodge that lumbered up behind us set one off right where we were going to walk.

Between Ju-jblu and Kreng Thaw putrid odors in the air betrayed the presence of unclaimed corpses, and the track was littered with cardboard packing tubes used for rifle grenades and mortar bombs, along with the small gauze-wrapped mortar charges. Lost personal effects were found too — Col. Nai Ong Nai picked up an ear cleaner and pocketknife on a chain.

We made it to Kreng Thaw. There was nothing now between us and the Burmese but jungle. They were out there somewhere, at least 15 clicks away, according to the

*Longyi-clad Mon grenadier with M79.*



Mon. That was good enough for me. I remembered Kreng Thaw from my last visit. There were a few civilians there then, with food stalls set up for the porters and merchants carrying the black-market goods into Burma proper. I had braved the monkey stew — said to be a local delicacy — and

wished I hadn't. It tasted like a concoction brewed up from the missing link and smelled just as ancient.

This time the village was deserted save for the occupying troops. I watched a 20-year-old deactivate a bottle-bomb hidden behind a tree, and was shown where others

had exploded. All that remained were small craters, bloodstains and, at one booby-trapped water bowl, a broken watch strap and fragments of an M1 Carbine, indicating a Burmese officer had bought it there.

Normally Kreng Thaw is a tranquil, picturesque spot. It lies at the confluence of two small rivers, and there is a waterfall just beyond. But on the path that leads down to the rivers, two civilians had been killed by the Burmese, a girl and a baby. The Mon claimed the girl had been raped and disemboweled.

Down at the rivers were more discarded packing tubes for 60mm and 81mm mortar bombs and some heavily bloodstained rocks, among which I picked up an empty vial of Burmese-issue penicillin. "Bottle-bombs," said the Mon, nodding with satisfaction.

While others went foraging in the jungle, a few of us took to the water for a welcome swim, and it wasn't just the grime of the journey I wanted to wash off. Soon the Mon reappeared with more war booty apparently dropped or thrown away by porters — five live 51mm mortar rounds and two bundles of fresh chillis and onions together with a bottle of cooking oil.

Two domestic pigs that had been left behind in the civilian evacuation — and obviously overlooked by the Burmese — were dispatched with rifle shots and loaded in the back of the truck for the return trip to Three Pagodas. It was just 15 clicks but took us an unbelievable four hours.

Statistically the losses and gains as claimed by the Mon and Karen in this December conflict ran to five Mon WIA, seven Karen KIA and 23 WIA, an estimated 50-60 Burmese casualties, and Burmese munitions consisting of 10,000 rounds of 7.62mm ammo and more than 150 rounds of mixed-caliber mortar bombs captured.

Not the least of the victims, however, were the estimated 6,000 civilian refugees who fled Three Pagodas township and all the villages up to and including Kreng Thaw and beyond. Their evacuation began on 10 December 1986 after NMSP officials advised of the imminent Burmese attack.

When I first arrived in Three Pagodas it was a ghost town. Not only was it deserted of all inhabitants, but their goods and belongings as well. All shops had packed up and shipped out their merchandise and headed for the sanctuary of Thailand. By 21 December the civilians were allowed to return and on the 22nd some food stalls were operating, but most still refused to leave the safety of their jungle camps. These camps were scattered about the Thailand-Burma border or in the border villages of Nam Khok and Sangkria, where the NMSP, with the assistance of some international aid agencies, set up relief centers dispensing essential food rations and medicines.

Furthermore, in common with all Burmese operations against the ethnic minorities, the border battle has spawned a host of other innocent victims. These are the civilian porters — men, women and children —

## ANCIENT ENMITY — MODERN HOSTILITY

Historically, Mon-Burmese enmity goes back a millenium or more. The Mon, a Mongoloid stock, are thought to have migrated, along with their Khmer cousins, from the southern China region about 5000-6000 B.C. The Mon settled around the river mouths of lower Burma, establishing kingdoms there as well as in neighboring Thailand long before the later migrating ethnic Burmese and Thais. Conflict with the Burmese was periodic and Mon dynasties flourished and fell, culminating in the final loss of Mon independence when their last kingdom, known variously as Rehmomya, Hongsavatoi and Pegu, fell to the Burmese in 1757.

Ironically, the Mon cooperated with the Burmese in attempts to win independence from the British. To this end the United Mon Association was formed in 1946, and in 1947 the Mon Freedom League and Mon United Front were set up by Nai-Shwe Kyin and Nai Hla Maung respectively.

In the same year a seven-point demand for the safeguard of their rights was put by these groups to the interim Burmese government, the AFPFL, but the Burmese slyly insinuated that the Mon and the Burmese were indistinguishable in racial identity and characteristics, and so separate minority rights should not be contemplated.

Although the Mon were unified in their demand for a Mon State, Burma achieved its independence from the British in 1948 without paying heed to minority voices — in fact imprisoning and assassinating many Mon, including Buddhist monks.

At the beginning of August 1948, the Mon and the equally determined Karen pledged a joint effort to attain their separate states. Days later, 19 Mon leaders were arrested and detained in Moulmein jail. This move prompted the Mon and Karen to occupy the cities of Thaton and Moulmein, together with a substantial part of present-day Karen State.

The Burmese countered by announcing an official enquiry into minority claims for regional autonomy, but little was achieved except that the Mon and Karen national defense organizations (now their military wings) were declared illegal and the Burmese regained control of the cities. Thus the unconstitutional armed struggle was underway — offi-

cially on 31 August 1948, now celebrated annually as Mon Revolution Day.

In different parts of the country scattered groups of armed Mon operated independently of each other, until by 1953 they were gradually assimilated into one group, the Mon People's Front (MPF), whose president was Nai Oung Htoon. In 1958, after minor language and cultural concessions were made by the Burmese and Prime Minister U Nu talked of creating a Mon State, the MPF mostly surrendered.

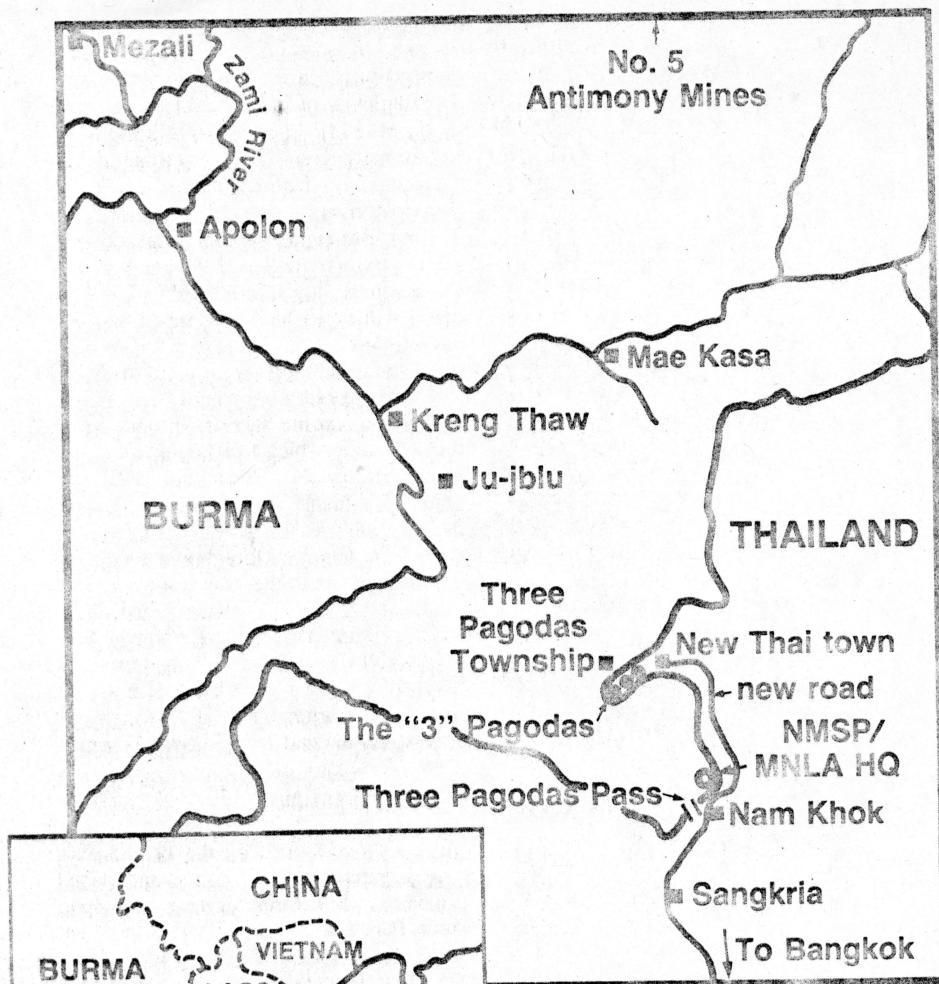
But certain parties held out and combined with elements still left in the jungle to form in the same year the New Mon State Party (NMSP), presided over by Nai Shwe Kyin. That year too the NMSP formed an ineffective alliance with the communists in order to overthrow the U Nu regime. Later in 1970 a united front with the Karen and deposed U Nu forces was formed to take on the Ne Win regime which had come to power by a military coup in 1962. The united front collapsed in 1977.

In January 1974 the Burmese government created a Mon State comprising the districts of Moulmein and Thaton, but the NMSP claims also the district of Pegu and the Mergui-Tavoy districts of the Tenasserim Division, being the greater part of the traditional Hongsavatoi Mon homeland.

The principal aim of the NMSP was (and still is) to establish an independent sovereign Mon State comprising all the above districts, unless the Burmese government is willing to grant all the minorities a federation of free nationalities exercising full rights of self-determination, including the right of secession.

In April 1981 irreconcilable factionalism within the NMSP culminated in a split. In the early days this was exacerbated by internecine feuding between the troops (mostly the Headquarters Security Unit) loyal to the then-NMSP President Nai Shwe Kyin and the majority of the MNLA, which is now headed by the new NMSP President, Nai Nonla. In 1982 the Nai Nonla faction joined the National Democratic Front (NDF), an alliance of nine ethnic minorities in Burma waging war against the Ne Win regime for federation. The Nai Shwe Kyin faction remains independent.

The Burmese have always resisted the minorities' attempts at Balkanization, and so the host of bush wars that have flared along Burma's border zones since independence continues unabated.



TOP: Area around Three Pagodas Pass. Scene of latest fighting between Burmese and Mon and Karen forces.

ABOVE: Enlarged area straddles Thailand-Burma border west-northwest of Bangkok.

who are pressed into service by the Burmese army to carry food and ammo for the duration of the campaign. The day I arrived in Three Pagodas a jeepload of Mon turned up with one such porter whom they had intercepted in the jungle after he had escaped from the Burmese. He told me his story.

Phar Da is a 38-year-old Karen from Apolon village, midway between Kreng Thaw and Mezali. He was taken at gunpoint on 11 December while walking to his rice field, in a roundup that netted five fellow villagers. Phar Da said that at first he had to carry a soldier's pack, and later rice. He was fed twice a day — rice and salted fish — but received no monetary payment.

In the act of running away from the Burmese he had leapt off a cliff and suffered

heavy abrasions to the face and a suspected fractured arm. I asked him why he did it. Phar Da said that the Burmese knew he had two sons in the KNLA and that an officer had given orders for him to be shot as punishment.

This isn't the first time that Three Pagodas has been under siege. Previous Burmese moves were made against it in April 1980, May 1984, and April and July 1985, with varying degrees of success. This little border settlement provides not only sanctuary for the insurgent forces but also revenue for their struggle from the taxation of black-market goods.

In the good times Three Pagodas is packed with such a miscellany of goods that I can't decide if they are bizarre products in a jungle market or jungle products in a bazaar. In the numerous general stores that occupy this sprawling one-track emporium, you can find fresh bamboo shoots and fungi from the jungle alongside *longyis* (Burmese national dress) and gawdy paintings from Rangoon.

There is the full spectrum, from essentials (curiously all with animal brand-names) to luxury goods: Donald Duck batteries, Bear candles, Elephant rubber sandals, Crocodile biscuits, Peacock combs, Rabbit cheroots, Turtle mosquito nets and Zebra pots and pans. Even gunpowder for homemade shotguns is available.

Attracted by the lucrative commercial

prospects here is a medley of races which gives Three Pagodas a certain ethnological charm. Apart from the Mon, Karen and Thai, there are Yunnanese traders, Sikh textile merchants, Bengali tea-shop proprietors, Shan miners and Arakan betel-nut sellers. There are even a couple of Wa from the extreme north of Burma bordering China, whose "wild" ancestors were feared as headhunters. One of the Wa sported a Boy George T-shirt, a rather dubious cultural leap forward.

The most important trade item from Thailand is the food seasoning agent monosodium glutamate (MSG), known here as *Aji-no-Moto*. From Three Pagodas an army of ox-carts and porters, the latter burdened under three to four 10-kilogram tins each, carries it on a seemingly endless procession into Burma. Most seems destined for Moulmein.

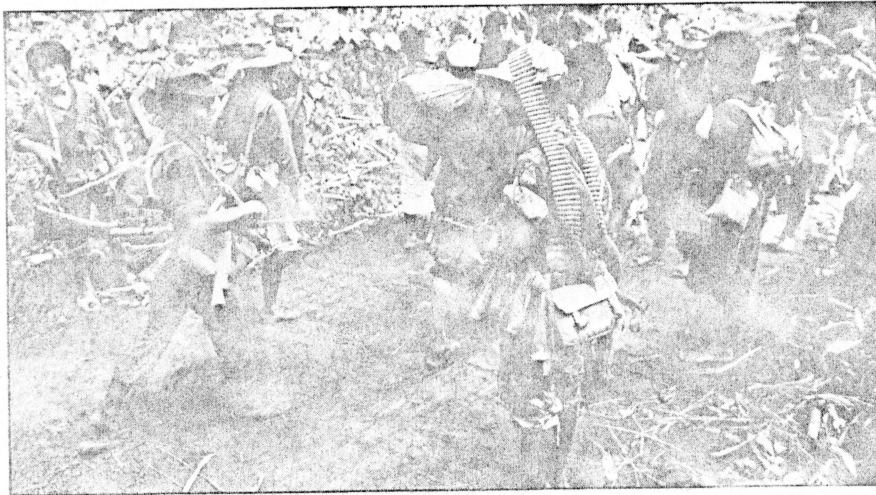
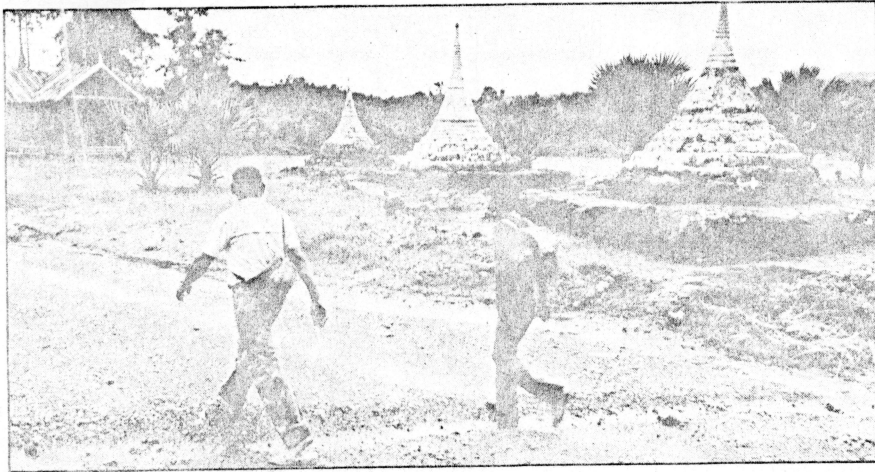
One porter I spoke to on my previous trip, a 25-year-old Karen from Mudon (30 clicks from Moulmein), was making his first trip in order to supplement his income from rice farming. Along with 10 others he had contracted to carry three tins of *Aji-no-Moto* at 100 *kyats* (U.S. \$3) per tin for the four-and-a-half-day walk from Three Pagodas to the Burmese township of Kya-in Seikkyi, from which it would be shipped by steamer to Moulmein.

Food is provided by the merchant, though sometimes the porter must carry it himself. Sometimes the porters must sleep out in the jungle, and always they have to remain on the alert for the presence of Burmese soldiers.

Both the Mon and the Karen maintain "customs gates" in Three Pagodas to levy "taxes" on goods entering or leaving the town. Rates vary according to the goods and the gate; that is, one tin of *Aji-no-Moto* is taxed equally at 28 Thai *baht* (U.S. \$1) by both the Mon and Karen, but polyester cloth goes for 1.5 *baht* a yard with the Karen but only 1.0 *baht* a yard with the Mon. The Mon also have gates along the coast and additional revenue comes from a household tax of villages under NMSP supervision. The Karen raise extra cash from the sale of antimony mined at Mae Kasa and farther north, although present hostilities have put the damper on those operations for the time being.

I was invited to stay at Mon headquarters by NMSP President Nai Nonla. I've always enjoyed that: There is a chance for a decent wash, a quiet sleep and the food is excellent. HQ is at Nam Khok village, presumably on the Burmese side of the border to preserve formalities. There is a training camp, signals post, hospital, women's barracks, arsenal, vegetable gardens, offices and the president's bamboo-shrouded residence.

This time the parade ground, which is overlooked by a sign exhorting the sage military maxim "One bullet, one enemy," was empty. Last time I was here, 30 soldiers were drilling while nearby, among the grazing cows, a unit of 20 women soldiers — from a total complement of about 100 —



practiced ambush and assault tactics at a footbridge and stream.

It was amusing to listen to the women's falsetto voices crying "boom-boom" as they fired bamboo sticks in lieu of real weapons, but their enthusiasm and vigor were not dulled by the repeated plunging through the stream waters or stalking through wet grass as the training officers bellowed commands at them punctuated by live rifle fire.

A winding path leads off through the jungle from the new main road now passing through Nam Khok. It brings you to the sentry-posted entrance of Mon headquarters. As in Three Pagodas, the guards were women soldiers, a home guard if you like. Gone were the bamboo sticks. Each was armed with an automatic weapon. Waiting for night to fall I wandered over to the NMSP hospital to check on the patients. As hospitals go it's nothing too grand, but at least there is concrete on the floor and a tin roof. There was only one war-wounded; the rest were malaria cases. This guy had had an AK round taken out of his thigh, and the medic was now inserting a gauze-wrapped probe to clear the wound of putrefaction. Judging by the patient's reaction to the six inches of steel moving inside his leg, he wasn't under much sedation.

The serious cases requiring major surgery are sent to a mission hospital several hours' drive away, where a staff of foreign doctors

**TOP:** The three Buddhist *chedis* which give the Three Pagodas pass and township their name.

**ABOVE:** Karen soldiers returning from the mountains near Mae Kasa.

ask no questions, just administer their much-needed skills. Mostly they have to perform amputations resulting from antipersonnel mine injuries. The youngest soldier there was a 12-year-old Karen. I'd seen him brought in from the field with his left leg looking like spaghetti. The doctors had already cut below the knee but confessed they might have to go a bit higher.

In the evening I spoke with NMSP President Nai Nonla and a member of the Moulmein district committee, Nai Aung Htin, who doubled as an interpreter for the finer points of the interview.

Regarding Burmese intentions in this current offensive, Nai Nonla had this to say: "As far as I am concerned, the enemy want to take Three Pagodas and to settle here. They want to control the border . . . and to control the trade that goes on here." The pertinent point here is that by hitting at the economic base of the insurgents, the Burmese are effectively spiking their guns.

Further, the Mon claim the Burmese are embarking on a village collectivization policy reminiscent of the so-called "strategic hamlet" system operated by the Americans in Vietnam. "They don't like villages under

our control," Nai Nonla said about the Burmese. "They want to destroy our influence on the people." The Burmese are also reportedly confiscating the entire rice crop of the people after harvest, save the barest minimum for survival. Many villagers are forced to buy at inflated prices on the black market to feed their families adequately — others have chosen to flee to the border.

Regarding future tactics, Nai Nonla said: "We are now considering to make a combined NDF [National Democratic Front; see the accompanying "Ancient Enmity — Modern Hostility."] Southern Command to defend our territory along the border, and to make an offensive of our own." This group would consist of Mon, Karen and Arakanese, together with the Muslim force attached to the Karen 6th Brigade.

The 786 Kawthoolei Muslim Liberation Force, presided over by Dr. Abdul Razak, has no political axe to grind — their *raison d'être* is religious oppression. Hafiz Hussein Ashad, the 37-year-old 786 Force military commander in Three Pagodas, told me Muslims are being systematically driven out of the predominantly Buddhist-populated Burma through a policy of persecution and burning of mosques. For their survival they must band together with the minority armies.

Combined action is clearly an advantage for the smaller, undermanned groups. Even the Mon, with a claimed total of 3,000 men under arms (a figure including village militia) are relatively impotent if pitted against the superior government forces.

As we sipped our coffees, Nai Nonla went on to address the problem of the split in the NMSP, an absurdity in light of the proposed combined NDF command. With a smile Nai Nonla hinted that a rapprochement between the two factions may be imminent. In early December 1986, talks were held at the new Mon temple in Sangkhlaburi, 22 klicks from Three Pagodas, in which the potential reunion of the two sides was rated as "agreed to in principle and now under consideration."

Nai Nonla also expressed concern over the recent Burmese attacks, noting their continued presence in Mezali as a sign that "it is very likely that they will expand their operation and attack again."

Prophetic words indeed, for five days later the northernmost No. 5 antimony mines of the Karen were occupied again — this time, according to Karen sources, by reinforcements from 62 Battalion headquarters at Mudon.

Also on the march were the Burmese troops of 31 Battalion, who left Mezali and arrived on the following day, 28 December 1986, at Yapru, about 10 klicks east of Mae Kasa and only a few klicks short of the Thailand-Burma border, prompting Karen speculation that the Burmese might be contemplating an outflanking maneuver via Thai territory.

This did not happen either. On the eve-

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## BURMA

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ning of 29 December, after Karen and Burmese clashes, the Karen intercepted Burmese radio messages ordering a pullback to headquarters, which began the next day. By 31 December, 62 Battalion was reported to have left No. 5 mine area and 31 Battalion was moving slowly and cautiously along the hilltops, apparently circuiting Mae Kasa.

The same day I was driven up to the Mae Kasa mines for a tour of inspection. The situation was quiet and we delivered tobacco and betel-nut supplies to the MNLA soldiers dug in on the hillsides. Most were sleeping; some were fishing in the nearby river. Antimony — which looks a bit like

lead — is mined from open-cut scars using bulldozers, though the work had been suspended for the present. Production for 1986 was down from previous years to 500 tons, but with first quality (over 50 percent pure) antimony fetching \$615 (U.S.) a ton in sale to Thai merchants, that's still a substantial contribution to the war coffers.

Thai authorities have been monitoring the border conflict out of concern for any possible spillovers into Thailand. They are prepared to tolerate refugees but not military incursions. The big brass was choppered in for a quick appraisal while two Royal Thai air force L-19 Bird Dogs were stationed at Sangkria, from which the newly constructed road to Three Pagodas served as a convenient airstrip. And, for a while, shotgun-toting Border Patrol Police were checking traffic coming and going from the border.

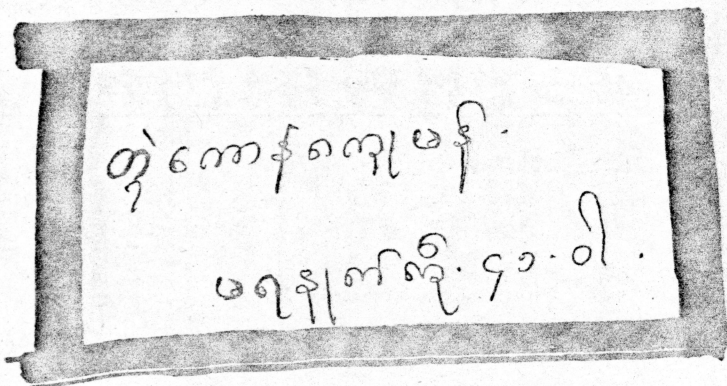
Whether the Burmese intention is to achieve a military victory over the insurgent forces and push them out of their Three Pagodas base once and for all, or whether it is merely to apply an economic blockade, is yet unclear.

If it is the former (and current dry season conditions favor the continued Burmese presence for at least three months), then the onus is on the attackers to break the stalemate.

The Mon are resigned to their defensive role. Limited military muscle prohibits a major offensive of their own, and the NDF combined force is yet to be blooded. The proposed reunion of the Nai Nonla and Nai Shwe Kyin factions will satisfy the desires of the party and people, but won't tip the military balance very far.

Furthermore, the expanding Thai settlement opposite Three Pagodas township, with its swarm of new buildings under construction, including a "hotel-resort complex" and busloads of Thai tourists, may preclude future Burmese ventures here if this one fails.

That being the case, the Mon may well expect a continuing, if not intensified, offensive. Should the Burmese government fail to dislodge the Mon, the insurgents will remain what they have been in the past: not a tangible threat to the Rangoon regime, but a persistent thorn in the side of the Burmese and a constant reminder of the minority dissatisfactions that are like a plague along the nation's frontiers. ✕



THE MOVEMENTS OF  
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