MEMOIRS OF THE FOUR-FOOT COLONEL

by Gen. Smith Dun
First Commander-in-Chief of Independent Burma's Armed Forces

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THE CORNELL UNIVERSITY SOUTHEAST ASIA PROGRAM

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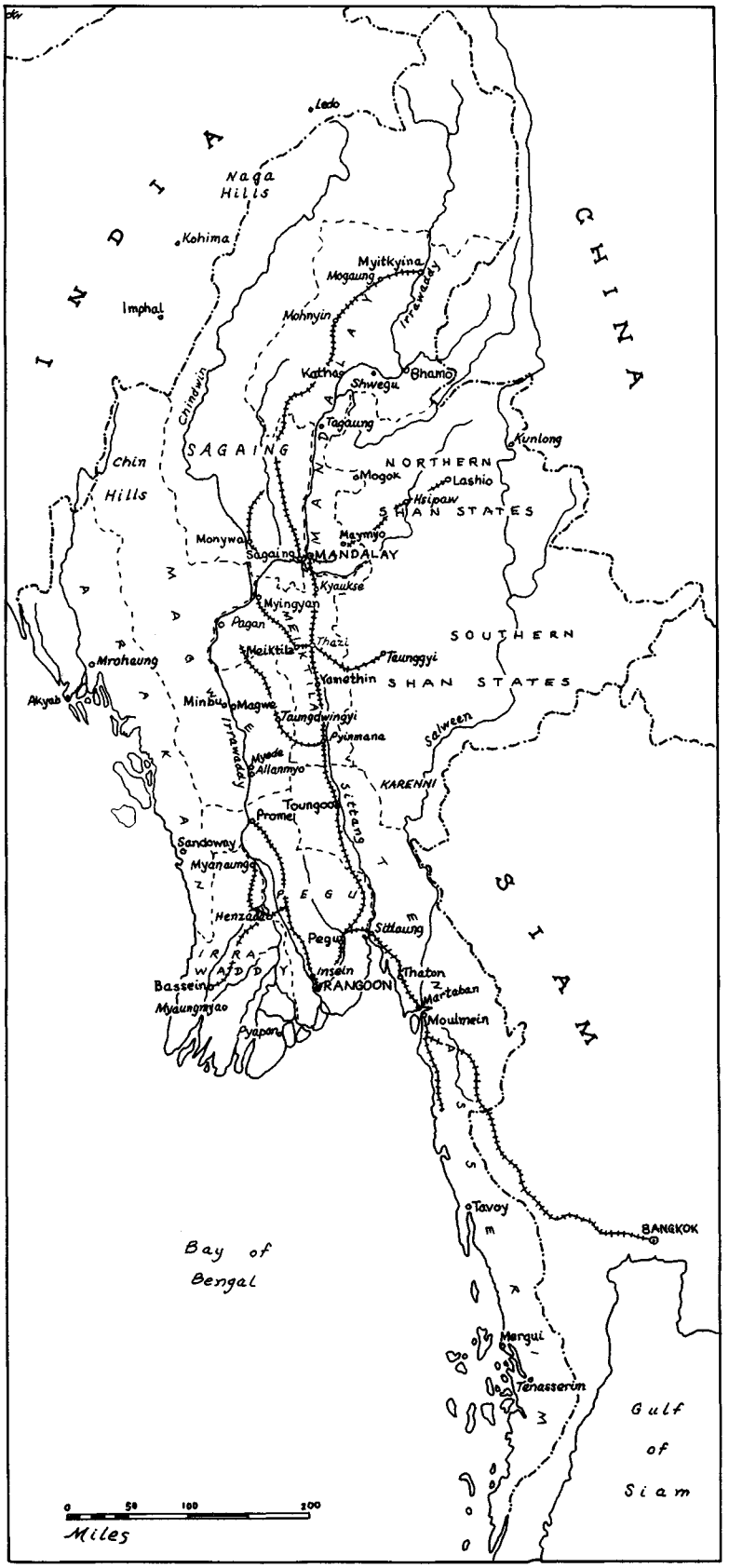
PREFACE

Memoirs, whether of those in high place or low, are prime sources for the detail and color which flesh out the spare frame of history, bringing to it that sense of human vitality so necessary for real understanding. Smith Dun was one of those who rose to high place indeed--from Karen farm boy to Commander-in-Chief of the army of Burma in little more than the first half of his life. His memoirs, filled with color and humor, give us an account of the struggle for Burmese independence which is unique. As a Karen himself he provides us with special understanding of both the Karen peoples and that difficult period of Karen rebellion following independence. His story is without guile or bias. With keen appreciation of his Karen-ness he yet remained a loyal soldier of Burma throughout his life.

Editing of these memoirs has been limited to questions of clarity in order to preserve as fully as possible the vivid flavor of Smith Dun's English style. The author included many lengthy quotations and, although some of them are not otherwise inaccessible, they acquire new significance in the context of this story; these have been identified and cited in so far as possible.

The Southeast Asia Program is pleased and honored to have the opportunity to make available these memoirs of a most important period of Burmese history written by one of its chief protagonists--the Four-Foot Colonel.

Robert B. Jones



BURMA: CIRCA 1945

INTRODUCTION

General Smith Dun died in 1979 in Kalaw, Shan State, Burma. Born on November 11, 1906 in the Irrawaddy Delta, he was virtually a forgotten figure in contemporary Burmese history, if not in the minds of many of his older countrymen.

The general lived in quiet retirement for thirty years in Maymyo, Myitkyina, and Kalaw. His tranquil life and intentional obscurity from the public masked strongly held views on the state of Burma and its directions. His reluctance to resume a public posture was in the best traditions of the military education he received and the rank he held. He was a good and loyal soldier of the Union of Burma.

General Smith Dun's critical role in Burmese history was a product neither of his military exploits nor of the important position he held as Commander-in-Chief of the Burma army. It was, rather ironically, a result of his initial appointment to that position and his departure from it.

To some he may appear to be a footnote to contemporary Burmese history, but he was more than that. In the standard accounts of the transition from colonialism to Burmese independence and of the early and traumatic years of the Republic, he is usually mentioned only in passing. However, his appointment was an essential element in the formation of the Union of Burma.

In 1947, the Burman leadership under the direction of Aung San was negotiating with both the British and the minority groups on the nature and scope of the new state. There was considerable debate on the extent of the proposed state and on the inclusion of the minority groups that, under British rule, had been governed separately. These negotiations reached a climax at the critical meeting that began on February 7, 1947 at the town of Panglong in the Shan State, where the minority groups were brought together by Aung San to discuss the state's composition. At the meeting, which the Karens also attended as observers, the Shan and Kayah States were given the right of secession after ten years, should their inclusion in the Union of Burma not prove to their satisfaction. A Kachin State was also planned but, since it would contain substantial areas that were Burman in population, it was not allowed to leave the Union.

The Karens, of whom General Smith Dun was one, were a special problem. They were more articulate and more Anglicized than the other groups because of the larger proportion of Christians among them. Their centers of population in the mountains of eastern Burma and in the Irrawaddy Delta were interspersed with those of Burmans and other groups. Because of their perceived special relationship with the British and their cooperation with them against the Japanese in the Second World War, the Karens had hoped for independence--an independence that the Burmans were not prepared to grant.

In this context General Smith Dun played an important role. To assuage the Karens' fears and to demonstrate that the new Burma, soon to be independent once again, would indeed be a union in which various ethnic groups participated in the process of national formation and growth, it was agreed that General Smith Dun would be given command of the Burma army. Before World War II the Burmese armed forces had a large percentage of Karens recruited by the British, and after independence General Smith Dun became the personification of Burman good faith towards the Karens. Although he had a strong sense of Karen consciousness, he was a loyal soldier of the Union.

On independence, General Smith Dun was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the army and of the police forces, with Ne Win as his deputy. His tenure as commander

was short-lived, for, with the very structure of government endangered by the Karen rebellion and Karen troops threatening Rangoon, Smith Dun was removed from his command on February 1, 1949. He was placed on indefinite leave, and never returned.[1] U Nu, in his autobiography, wrote that Smith Dun "found his position untenable when the KNU (Karen National Union) revolted. He then took leave preparatory to retirement. The government did not force him to go on leave. On the contrary, the defense minister, on the instructions of the premier, tried to persuade him to return to active duty."[2] General Smith Dun tells a somewhat different story. He resigned when Burmese troops burned the Karen quarter of the Rangoon suburb of Thamaing and U Nu preferred to deal with Smith Dun's deputy, Ne Win. The general's loyalty to the Union remained strong, and it was to his credit that he was able to keep the Karen military units under control during that difficult period.[3]

Nothing became the general more than the manner in which he left the high position he had held. He remained faithful to the government and was exemplary in his dealings with the civil authorities during that turbulent period. Had he joined the insurgent Karen forces, the history of Burma might well have been different.

About 1960 I was privileged to pay a call on General Smith Dun in his home in Maymyo, when we had tea together, and he told me something of his life. At that time he gave me a copy of the manuscript, *The Four-Foot Colonel*, the memoir of his life up to that time. He wanted me to read the manuscript, but he also clearly wanted to ensure that it would some day reach a wider audience.

I kept the memoirs, secure among boxes of Burmese materials, throughout my peregrinations in Asia. With Smith Dun's death in 1979, it seemed appropriate to seek their publication. General Smith Dun may have prepared additional chapters of his autobiography after I met him, but if they exist, they are not available to me. I hope, however, that, if they are discovered, they might also some day be published.

The importance of this memoir lies in its first-hand account of the rise of a talented and determined man through one of the few channels of social mobility existing during the colonial period and the early years of independence. It offers rare insight into the views and motivation of a man who was loyal to his country and to the traditions of his training. This autobiography stresses the two aspects of his life about which he felt most keenly: his military life and his Karen ethnicity. The role of the Burmese military and the ethnic divisions within the country remain two of the major factors that will shape Burma's future.

I would like to thank Cornell University for publishing this work and especially Professor David Wyatt for his interest in it and in contributing to our understanding of Burma during this important period.

David I. Steinberg

Bethesda, Maryland
March, 1980

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1. Hugh Tinker, *The Union of Burma* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 40.
2. U Nu, *Saturday's Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 173n.
3. John Cady, *The United States and Burma* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 199-200.

FOREWORD BY GENERAL D. T. COWAN

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2. 11. 58

The author has honoured me by asking me to write a Foreword to his Memoirs. I do so very gladly.

S. Dun and I first met when he arrived in the first batch of cadets to the Indian Military Academy, Dehra Dun.

In a very short space of time he made his mark there, and became the first under officer in my Company--"B" Company which in no small measure owing to his leadership and personality became the Champion Company.

S. Dun earned the respect, admiration and affection of both Instructors and Cadets and was presented with the Sword of Honour on passing out from the Indian Military Academy.

In the 1939-1945 war he and I met again when he served under me in the 17th Indian Division (The Black Cats). In war he again proved himself a leader and by his work on active service obtained a nomination to the Staff College.

When Burma obtained self government he was the obvious choice as Commander-in-Chief, and was duly selected. His record was, therefore, outstanding, rising as he did from the ranks by merit-promotion, to become a Commander-in-Chief.

I have not had the good fortune to read the Memoirs but, knowing the author, I am confident that they will be full of interest and by no means devoid of humour.

His comrades of the 17th Indian Division will always remember, with great respect and affection, their friend "The Four-Foot Colonel."

Signed: D. T. Cowan

G.O.C. 17th Indian Division
(The Black Cats)

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

The story of a four-foot Colonel is about no other person than General Smith Dun, with important and relevant incidents that occurred in the course of his life. He was known to all his intimate friends as Smithy, especially to his British and American friends.

His interest in Army life was aroused at a tender age by Karen soldiers returning on leave and recruiting duties, who came to his village. He would listen with great interest for hours to those soldiers who would be relating their experiences of travel and adventures of the First World War. Among those soldiers there were many from his own village, including his elder brother, who came back as a Naik or Corporal at the end of the First World War. His enthusiasm was heightened by hearing more stories from his brother. From that time his one and only dream for his future was to become a soldier and to see and experience all that he had heard. In his dream for the future, one thing which was outstandingly embedded in his mind was to rise to the top rank, and to go through a hellish war, at the end of which, to come out unscathed and take part in the victory parade in London as was done after the First World War.

All his dreams came true, in fact more than he dreamed. At that time, the highest rank to which a native soldier could rise from the ranks was Subadar Major (A Viceroy Commission).

It was Field-Marshal Sir William Slim who gave him the name of "Four-Foot Colonel." Sir William came to know him from his cadet days. During one of the General's visits at the Indian Military Academy at Dehra Dun, there was a physical efficiency test for all the cadets. In the high jump, although Dun was the shortest, he jumped the highest and incidentally above his height. During the victory parade for the Second World War in 1946, the two were chatting together in Kensington Gardens one evening; Sir William casually remarked to one of the reporters near by, introducing him by saying, "This is Colonel Dun (Doon) who is only four feet tall, but used to jump one inch above his height," and also added, "I wonder if he can do it now though."

The same evening the photograph of the Four-Foot Colonel and all his achievements came out in one of the papers (*Star* or *Evening Star* I am not quite sure now). It was quite an advertisement for him.

CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND

The following is an honest attempt to trace the origin of the Karens in the light of their tradition and records left by the early missionaries and British Government officials who came in contact with them in the last century.

Origin of the Karens

There are White Karens, Red Karens, Black Karens, Striped, etc., so designated from the colour of their dress. The Shan name for Karen is Yang. In Burmese pronunciation we hear of Yens, Yeins, Yenbows, Yen-Seik. The Red Karens called themselves Kayah and some of the Bghai Karens called themselves Kayay, which might have been the origin of the Burmese word, though it had been derived from "*Ayin*" (prior time) and a primitive particle, thus signifying aboriginal. But it is quite certain that the Karens are not the aboriginal inhabitants of Burma, says Dr. Mason. He has also said:

> In my early travels, the Karens pointed out to me the precise spot where they took refuge in the days of Alompra; and where they had come down and avenged themselves on their enemies, but when I asked them who built this city, as we stood together on the forest-clad battlement of a dilapidated fortification, they replied these cities of our jungles were in ruins when we came here. This country is not our own, we came from the North, where we were independent of the Burmese, the Siamese, and the Talaings who now rule over us.
>
> There we had a city and country of our own near Ava called Taungoo. All the Karens of Siam, Burma and Pegu came originally from that region. When I asked for the time of dispersion they were silent. The fact was clearly before them, but the retrospect was too obscure to determine the distance. Yet they saw far beyond Taungoo. On the edge of the misty horizon was the river of the running sand, which their ancestors had crossed before coming. That was a fearful trackless region where the sand rolled before the wind like the waves of the sea. They were led through it by a chieftain who had more than human powers to guide them. Saw Quala, when he first related the tradition, remarked that the whole story seemed to him like Moses guiding the children of Israel across the Red Sea and through the desert.
>
> To what river or water of running sand referred to was quite an enigma to me for several years, till I met with the journal of the Chinese Buddhist Pilgrim FA HIAN who came from China to India in the early part of the 5th Century of the Christian era. He thus designated the great desert between China and Tibet. The Governor of the town of sands, he says, furnished his party with necessary means of crossing the river of sands. He continued: "And such scorching winds that who so encountered them dies and none escape. Neither birds are seen in the air, nor quadrupeds on the ground.

> On every side as far as the eyes can reach, if you seek for the proper place to cross there is no other mark to distinguish it than the skeletons of those who have perished there; those alone seem to indicate the route."

Karen tradition says that the chieftain who led the party stretched the staff in his hand and, as they crossed, from time to time a stone rolled up in a path before them to show the course they ought to take.

As for the date and time or era when the Karens made this crossing for their southward migration, there is no record within reach. But there seems to be a link fitting into the above move, which was recorded by Dr. W. C. Dodd, DD. in his book "The Tai Race." Dr. Dodd had served for 33 years as a missionary in China, Siam and Burma. From his experience, exploration and research he wrote about the Karens in his book thus:

> The name Yûn is not a new name. It is the name by which they have been known by the peoples around them from earliest history. When the first great Tai migration drifted down from China as early as the sixth century B.C., the Ai Lao found the country east of the Salween inhabited by the Yûn or Karens . . . the Karen kingdom seems to have been a large domain extending from the Salween to the Mêkong and probably as far south as Cambodia. Its riches were said to be immense. As the Ai Lao offered their allegiance to the Yûn or Karen King he accepted it and allowed them to dwell in his land. In the early part of that century if not earlier they had built several large towns in what was then Yûn (Karen) country. Among these were Mueng Lem, and Chiengrung, Chientung, and Chiensen the oldest town in what is now Siam.
>
> According to the local history I have read, in the year 543 B.C. the Ai Lao by strategy threw off the Karen yoke in all these towns and surrounding districts. But they got thereby the Karen name according to Mr. Hallet. [William Clifton Dodd, *The Tai Race* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Torch Press, 1923), pp. 250-51.]

Mr. Cross refers to a tradition, preserved by the Mons (Talaing) who he thinks are manifestly a more ancient people in further India than the Burmans, which he is of the opinion shows that the Karens were already in possession of the country to the east of the Bay of Bengal when the Mon themselves made their appearance in their southern progress as far as the promontory of Martaban.

After quoting Dr. Mason to the fact that when Gautama visited Thaton several centuries before the Christian era he found the Talaings occupying the country surrounded by barbarous people styled "Baloo," the Burmese equivalent for wild man or savages, Mr. Cross goes on to say that one can infer that the Baloos were the Karen from the fact that the island south of Martaban, known as Beloogyun or Beloo Island, was found to be almost exclusively inhabited by the Karens. Mr. Cross also points out that one of their ancient traditions distinctly gave their location on the Eastern side of a body of water, which they called "Kaw or Kho." the present inhabitants have lost the meaning of these words and the so-called body of water has become a mystery to them, so ancient is the tradition which refers to it. Yet the tradition, when examined, carries with it its own explanation of water: "Kaw," according to our ancestors, is a body of water to the west. They represent the bueros or hornbills migrating across it in seven days. As soon as the rainy season begins the hornbills migrate to the other side of the "kaw" to a country where it is the dry season, which is a seven days' journey. There they lay their eggs and raise their young; again when the dry season returns here, it is wet season on the opposite side and hornbills return across the "kaw" to this country, where they arrive after seven days' journey.