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The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

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SOUTHEAST ASIA

Matthew Wheeler, most recently a RAND Corporation security and terrorism researcher, is studying relations among and between nations along the Mekong River.

On the Border with Colonel Kurtz

By Matthew Z. Wheeler

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BANGKOK, Thailand – I was trying to reach a village called Ban Huay Pheung in Mae Hong Son Province and I was halfway lost. The next day there was to be a ceremony to reopen a border crossing between Thailand and Burma,¹ and I wanted make sure I could find my way up to Ban Huay Pheung in the morning. After 30 minutes' drive from the provincial capital, I checked the map and for the first time noticed that there were two points labeled Ban Huay Phueng. I had intended to head west, where one of these points rested right on the border, but I had missed a turn. As chance had it, I was headed towards another Ban Huay Phueng, the last village on a road that continued north to the border.

After another half an hour, I reached a sign that read "Ban Huay Phueng." I stopped to photograph the sign, still unsure if it was the *right* Ban Huay Pheung. I had just started out again when I saw a foreigner in a New York Yankees hat and a camera slung across each shoulder slowing his motorcycle to a stop.

"You know where you're going?" he asked. It was a good question, though it seemed to carry some measure of judgment, as if he were saying, "Where do you think you're going!"

"Ban Huay Pheung. They're going to open the border tomorrow, and I want to check it out. Is this the right place?"

"Well, it's the right place, but it ain't happening."

He was a large man with a broad, ruddy face and blue eyes. He wore camouflage clothes and was smiling.

"You mean the border isn't opening?" I asked.

"Yeah, I was just up there talking to the guys at the border post. It's called off."

¹ In 1989, the military government of Burma changed the name of the country to the Union of Myanmar. The name change was meant to signal a break with the British colonial past. According to the Lonely Planet guide to Myanmar, "In Burmese literary contexts, the name Myanmar refers to the whole country, Bamar (from whence the English got Burma) refers to Burman ethnicity, or to the Burman language. ... The new government position finds Myanmar more equitable, since it doesn't identify the nation with any one ethnic group." However, as Bertil Lintner, a journalist and Burma expert, observes, "In fact, myanma and bama are the same word: ma and ba are often interchangeable in Burmese. Throughout history, before and after the arrival of the British, both names can be found in available records. However, both terms refer to a kingdom in the central Irrawaddy plain with its capital at Mandalay and not to any geographical area wider than that." As Lintner goes on to explain, neither Myanmar nor Burma nor any other term in the Burmese language describes a political entity that includes Burmans and ethnic minority people because no such entity existed before the British created the colony of Burma. "[I]nsisting that myanma means the whole country and in some way is a more indigenous term than bama is nonsense." See Michael Clark and Joe Cummings, *Myanmar (Burma)*, Seventh Edition, Melbourne: Lonely Planet 2000, p. 26 and Bertil Lintner, "Response to Michael Dobbs-Higginson," available at <http://www.euroburma.com/asia/euro-burma/linthigg.html>; accessed February, 2001.

I was very disappointed to hear this news. I had read about the border opening ceremony in the *Bangkok Post* just days before.² Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh was to preside at the ceremony and senior Burmese officials would also attend. I hoped that witnessing the ceremony would somehow give form to my interest in tensions between Thailand and Burma.

Relations between Burma's ruling military government, known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), and the Thai government have been characterized by mutual suspicion. In recent years, the Burmese border has become the locus of Thai security concerns as Burma's internal problems have bled into Thailand in the form of a million illegal immigrants and at least 120,000 refugees. These refugees are mostly ethnic minority people, Shan, Karen, Karenni, Pa-O, and others who have fled forced relocation, forced labor and other forms of persecution at the hands of the Burmese Army. Thai authorities have also blamed the SPDC for failing to curb production and trafficking of methamphetamines by the United Wa State Army (UWSA). This armed force of 20,000 men enjoys an uneasy alliance with Rangoon and operates with autonomy in much of Burma's Shan State. By 1998, the flood of amphetamines from Wa-controlled territory had become Thailand's number one security problem. Thai authorities have been largely helpless to



From Krungthep Thurakit, May 16, 2001. A Thai warrior (left) squares off with a Burmese warrior across the "borderline," spelled out in Thai by amphetamine pills.

stanch the flow the drug, known locally as 'ya ba' (crazy medicine).

For its part, the SPDC accuses Thailand of giving sanctuary and support to the ethnic-minority rebel groups fighting against Rangoon, most notably the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Shan State Army (SSA). Since the Royal Thai Army (RTA) began drug-suppression operations in 1999, Rangoon has criticized the Thai army for fomenting unrest along the border. Indeed, the SPDC closed all border crossings between the two countries in May amid serious border clashes involving the Burmese Army, the UWSA, the SSA and the Thai Army. It was only in October, after strenuous efforts by the Thai government to convince the SPDC of Thailand's good will, that Rangoon reopened three permanent border crossings. The ceremony at Ban Huay Pheung would mark another step forward in the Thai government's drive to restore relations with Burma.

While I was disappointed to hear that the ceremony wouldn't take place, I wasn't prepared to take this stranger's word for it. I wondered who he was, and why he might not want me to go to Ban Huay Pheung. The stranger and I parked our motorcycles on the side of the road and took seats in the little shack behind the village sign. He gave me his card—it advertised adventure tours—and he started talking.

I'll call him Walter. Of his several 'code names,' it was the one he preferred. He took the name from Walter E. Kurtz, the mad Special Forces colonel played by Marlon Brando in *Apocalypse Now*, Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 Vietnam-war adaptation of Joseph Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness*. Walter had been a sergeant in the US Army's 1st Air Cavalry Division, and he has a tattoo of the division patch on his calf to prove it. Walter's mission in life is tattooed on his other calf in a banner above crossed daggers that reads, "Free Asia." Like Brando's Colonel Kurtz, Walter is a champion of Southeast Asia's ethnic-minority groups in their fight against Communist oppression. Although he missed out on the Vietnam War, Walter took up the struggle of the Hmong people against the Communist government in Laos.³ "I'm a mercenary," he told me. The "adventure tours" bit was just a cover for his snooping around Asia. He'd photographed atrocities in Laos, been beaten up by Chinese cops in Tibet, and met Aung San Suu Kyi⁴ in Rangoon. He was also associ-

² *Bangkok Post*, January 5, 2003.

³ The Hmong live in mountainous regions of Burma, Laos, Thailand, southern China and Vietnam. The CIA recruited large numbers of Hmong to fight against North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces during the Second Indochina War. Some 35,000 Hmong soldiers were killed in the conflict. According to the Wisconsin-based Lao Human Rights Council, the Lao People's Democratic Republic government and the Vietnamese Army have killed 300,000 Hmong people since 1975. See the Lao Human Rights Council website at <http://www.laohumrights.org>.

⁴ Aung San Suu Kyi is the leader of Burma's National League for Democracy (NLD). The NLD won an overwhelming victory in parliamentary elections in 1990, winning 392 of 485 contested seats, but the military government's State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) refused to transfer power. Suu Kyi has been in talks with the SPDC since October 2000 and was released from nineteenth months of house arrest in May 2002. The talks between the NLD and the SPDC have made little evident progress. The daughter of Aung San, Burma's hero of independence who was assassinated in 1947, Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991.



The sign reads “Ban Huay Pheung.” The tiny figure on the road is “Walter,” just moments before I met him.

ated with the Free Burma Rangers, a network of former US Special Forces soldiers and Christian missionaries who offer humanitarian support to ethnic-minority people persecuted by the Burmese military.⁵ Although Walter calls himself a mercenary, he seems to finance his own operations, raising money in the US, buying medicine in California and delivering it himself to his contacts on the border. “I’m a one-man project,” he said. He

had been coming to Mae Hong Son for a decade, he said, and now, in the “semi-retirement phase” of his life, he was looking to buy some land and perhaps settle down.

After we talked for a while, Walter offered to ride with me back to Ban Huay Pheung. It was a small village set in a valley beside tidy rice fields hemmed in by steep hills. As we entered the village proper, we passed a military checkpoint. Walter hollered, “Ten-HUT!” and the soldiers in their makeshift huts smiled and waved. We stopped at another checkpoint at the far end of the village. There were several soldiers and policemen there, relaxing at the end of their workday, drinking and looking over some fighting cocks.

Walter greeted the soldiers and policemen. It became clear that his Thai-language skills extended no further than “Hello.” It seems he’d made it by these past ten years with body language and the strength of his command presence. His verbal communication with local people ran toward icons of American politics and popular culture that have penetrated much of the globe. Thus, Walter might greet some Shan villagers with, “Hello! USA! George W. Bush!” or perhaps just, “Rambo!”

The border guards were relaxed and friendly. They invited us to sit at their table and served us homemade



View of Ban Huay Pheung looking north

⁵ For a report on the Free Burma Rangers, see Frank Smith, “The Forgotten War,” July 26, 2002, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/correspondent/2151458.stm>.

liquor in tiny ceramic cups. I was pleased about the drinking and backslapping. I had been concerned that we wouldn't be welcome there. The government had barred foreign aid workers and journalists from the border in July after Rangoon complained that some were aiding the rebels. One of the men at the table asked me in halting English if I was a journalist. I said I was not, and he seemed satisfied with my answer. He went on to ask me where in Mae Hong Son I was staying, and why I had come to the border. I told him I had read about the border opening ceremony, and that I wanted to see it. Why, he wanted to know. I said I was interested in the border situation. I thought to myself that I had better come up with a better story. In answer to my query, he told me he was some kind of liaison officer, coordinating security efforts between the villagers, the police and the army. A few minutes later he got up to speak with one of the police officers. Walter nodded at them and said, "They're talking intelligence." I figured they were discussing what they should do with the nosy foreigners.

After several more shots of moonshine I was able to establish that the border ceremony had not been canceled, but it wasn't certain that it would take place. The soldiers and police would be ready to receive the VIPs at nine the next morning. Walter and I were welcome to come back if we wanted. It was getting late, so we took our leave and started back to Mae Hong Son.

About ten minutes outside Ban Huay Pheung, Walter pulled over.

"I want to talk to you a



minute," he said. I felt vaguely as if I were about to be threatened or sworn to secrecy. "OK, here's what I think. I think you're CIA."

Before I could begin to correct him, he said, "It's OK. You can swear up and down that you're not, but I think you are, so here's the deal: I know what's going on up here. I have some contacts, you know, and maybe we can help each other. There are genuine atrocities going on over there, across the border. I'm sure I don't need to tell you. Thousands killed. Check out my website, you'll see the pictures. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know, while we're out here in a secure environment, that if you need anything done, I'm up for it. Anything, anytime, anywhere."

"Well, don't be disappointed, but I'm not CIA. I'm just a guy who's interested in the border situation." For the second time that day I realized that it sounded preposterous, as the truth sometimes does.

"Yeah, right," said Walter. "You're 'just a guy.' We'll talk more in town."

That night we drank beer at the Crossroads, a small bar facing the town's only functioning stoplight. Walter was a gifted talker, though speaking with him was sometimes unsettling. It wasn't just his political views, which were somewhere to the right of Oliver North. Rather, it was Walter's tendency to accost people and demand to know their business. Passersby faced a good chance of being interrogated. Walter felt a need to keep tabs on all the foreigners in Mae Hong Son. "I'm the chief of this village," he told me. "Don't you worry, everything is well in hand." I didn't know what he meant by this, and I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

Walter eyed a group of Thai guys across the bar. "You've got to watch those guys. See the one with the short hair? He's got a jeep with 'No More War' stenciled on the side."

"Yeah, what's wrong with that?"

"War is good. It's necessary. It clears the air. You wait, in a couple of weeks we'll invade Iraq, and everything will fall into place. I just love what Bush is doing. Since he took over, everything in the world has come into focus, the way things really are."

As Walter talked—about the desirability of a crack epidemic in China, the genius of Iran-Contra, the best place to stay in Chiang Khong—I began to sense that he wasn't much like Colonel Kurtz at all. Rather, Walter seemed more like a combination of two other characters in *Apocalypse Now*. He had the military bearing and bravado of Robert Duvall's Colonel Kilgore, who loved the smell of napalm in the morning, and the manic energy of Dennis Hopper's hippie photojournalist. Unlike Colonel Kurtz, who rejected America's "timid, lying moral-

ity," and operated beyond good and evil, Walter saw the world in starkly moral terms. There was Good and Evil in the world and, the way Walter saw it, Good should kick Evil's ass.

At one point Walter squinted and asked, "Are you with me?" He wanted to make sure he wasn't talking to a Communist, a European, a tree-hugger, or some other kind of Jane Fonda-loving traitor. I couldn't assent to his views, not even in the flush of beery bonhomie, though I confess that I considered the possible consequences of dissent. Would he clam up, or clean my clock? I said that we didn't see eye-to-eye on many issues. He said, "OK, that's fine. I know you're a Good Guy." I supposed he still believed I was a Company man.

I didn't know to make of Walter. Here was a "mercenary" who paid his own way, who acted out of conviction, who had never been to war, and who confided to me that he hoped he'd never kill anyone. "If I do," he said, "I believe I'll go to hell." Yet not an hour before, he had declared his willingness to "take heads" on my behalf if I needed any heads taken. I began to suspect that he was more Walter Mitty than Walter Kurtz, but I couldn't be sure.

I tried to steer our conversation away from US politics and towards the Thai-Burma border. Walter followed the news (he had in his pocket the same newspaper article that had prompted my trip to the border), but he didn't know that the current Thai government is no friend to the ethnic-minority groups he had come to help. The government under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was working overtime to reassure the SPDC that Thailand does not support the rebels. The reopening of the border



The Thai Army, the media, and former Prime Minister Chuan Leekphai, stirring up trouble on the border, New Light of Myanmar, June 19, 2002.

crossing at Ban Huay Phueng was part of the payoff.

* * *

The SPDC closed the border on May 22, 2002, after two days of cross-border fighting near Chiang Dao in Chiang Mai. The facts of the May fighting are in dispute. Rangoon states that the SSA crossed into Burma from bases in Thailand to attack Burmese Army and UWSA outposts, with support from the Royal Thai Army. The Thai Army admits to firing shells into Burma, but states that it did so only in retaliation for Burmese shells landing on Thai territory. The Thai Army denies conducting any cross-border operations, and maintains that it has always acted in accordance with established rules of engagement and only to defend Thailand's territorial integrity. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Thaksin responded to the May clashes by ordering an immediate halt to a large military exercise then underway in northern Thailand. He also called on the Thai Army not to "over-react" to cross-border incursions by the UWSA or the Burmese Army.

The border closure in May was a significant setback for Thaksin's Burma policy. Thaksin came to office in February 2001 with a pledge to repair Thailand's relations with Burma. Thai-Burmese relations had grown especially contentious during the tenure of Democrat Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai. Under Chuan, Thailand had followed a cool but correct line with Rangoon, seeking to distance Thailand from the longstanding policy of "constructive engagement."⁶ Chuan's foreign-policy team emphasized the importance of human rights and democracy in their dealings with the SPDC, and Chuan made a point of not visiting Burma. At home, Chuan ordered the Third Army, responsible for Thailand's northern provinces, to suppress drug trafficking along the Burmese border. Chuan also appointed General Surayud Chulanont chief of the Army. Under Surayud, the RTA adopted an aggressive stance toward cross-border incursions.

During the election campaign, Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai party officials poured scorn on the Democrats' Burma policy. The emphasis on democracy and human rights, Thaksin maintained, had needlessly antagonized the SPDC and done nothing to build cooperation on important bilateral issues, including drug suppression. "We have let [the Burmese] dislike us," Thaksin said.⁷ Thaksin expressed confidence that he could quickly put bilateral relations on a new footing with a single visit to Rangoon. Thaksin's choice for

foreign minister, Surakiart Sathirathai, disparaged the Democrats' policy as a "Western approach" designed to pander to the United States and the European Union. As Surakiart explained, "We would like to promote democracy in Burma, but we would like to do it in the Asian way."⁸ Surakiart advocated a policy of "forward engagement" with Burma, which would emphasize commercial relations while making extensive use of "personal diplomacy." This approach would rely on personal contacts between Thai officials and businesspeople and members of Burma's ruling junta, rather than the institutional mechanisms favored by the Democrats. Indeed, even before the election, Thaksin dispatched at least two emissaries to Rangoon to brief the SPDC on his prospective Burma policy. These emissaries received assurances that the junta would welcome Thaksin's approach.⁹

In the event, Thaksin was forced to delay the implementation of his placatory Burma policy. Just as Thaksin was inaugurated, Burmese troops took control of a Thai Ranger outpost while trying to outflank an SSA position. Serious fighting ensued. The border was closed and skirmishing continued for weeks as both countries built up their forces. Under these circumstances, Thaksin was unable to make his much-vaunted trip to Rangoon. By June, however, the situation had cooled sufficiently for Thaksin finally to travel to Burma, where he and SPDC Chairman General Than Shwe issued a joint communiqué. A series of high-level exchanges followed, including visits to Bangkok by the SPDC Secretary-1 Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt in September and SPDC vice-chairman General Maung Aye in late April. It appeared that Thai-Burmese relations were on the mend.

The improvement in relations was only apparent. Mere weeks after General Maung Aye returned from his state visit to Bangkok, the border erupted again. The SPDC closed the border, banned Thai advertisements, staged anti-Thai demonstrations and even destroyed quantities of the Thai energy drink, Red Bull. After more than a year of the so-called "Asian Way," Thailand's relations with Burma had reached an all time low.

The lesson that Thaksin seems to have taken from the May incident is that he must demonstrate more explicitly to the SPDC his friendly intentions. Since the summer of 2002, Thaksin has undertaken a number of measures that appear to serve this purpose:

- In July 2002, the National Security Council banned foreign journalists and aid workers

⁶ The term "constructive engagement" was first used by Foreign Minister Arsa Sarasin to describe Thailand's Burma policy in 1991. The term was borrowed from the Reagan Administration's policy toward the South Africa government during the apartheid era. US officials then argued that quiet diplomacy and persuasion would do more to bring about change than confrontation and sanctions. Critics called "constructive engagement" a fig leaf for business as usual.

⁷ *Bangkok Post*, January 30, 2001.

⁸ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, February 22, 2001.

⁹ In May 2000, Surakiart met with SPDC officials in Rangoon. In December 2000, former Army Chief General Chettha Thanajaro traveled Rangoon on behalf of Thai Rak Thai.

from sensitive border areas following protests from Rangoon that foreigners were aiding rebel groups.

- In August, almost three months ahead of schedule, Thaksin announced the annual military reshuffle. General Surayud was “promoted” to Supreme Commander, a position technically higher than that of RTA Commander-in-Chief, but with less power. Surayud’s successor, General Somdhat Attanand, has proven more amenable to Thaksin’s conciliatory Burma policy.
- In October, Thaksin declared that Burma was not responsible in any way for Thailand’s drug problems, contradicting the assumptions that had informed Thai security policy for the past five years. Thaksin also praised Rangoon’s anti-drug efforts.¹⁰ One week after these statements, the SPDC reopened the permanent border crossings at Mae Sai-Tachilek, Mae Sot-Myawaddy, and Ranong-Kawthaung.
- Late in October, General Somdhat transferred the head of the Thai Army Special Forces to an inactive post. Rangoon had complained that the Special Forces had instigated tensions along the border by staging cross-border operations.¹¹ In November, General Somdhat acknowledged that Thailand’s anti-narcotics operations could damage ties with Burma.¹²
- On December 4, the Thai Army headquarters held a press conference to disavow the statement by the Third Army chief of staff that a billion speed pills would enter Thailand from Burma in 2003. According to the Army spokesman, the figure was a personal estimate, and did not reflect the positions or research of the Thai Army or the Ministry of Defense.¹³
- At the end of December, the Thai Army announced that Task Force 399, a special drug-suppression unit established in 1999 with US assistance, would no longer carry out counter-drug operations. Rangoon accused Task Force 399 of

staging cross-border raids, and the Thai Army conceded that the move aimed to “dispel Burmese suspicion” about the unit.¹⁴

- Thai authorities have stepped up arrests and deportations of ethnic minority and Burmese dissidents in Thailand. On December 10, Thai police raided a meeting of non-government organization and dissident activists in Mae Hong Son, arresting more than 20 people.¹⁵ Late in the month, in Kanchanburi province, 65 suspected Karen rebels were repatriated to Burma, in contravention of a Cabinet resolution allowing them to reside in Thailand for a year pending a nationality-verification process.¹⁶
- On December 29, the National Security Council chief Winai Phattiyakhul said that Thailand would no longer accept refugees fleeing conflict in neighboring countries. “From now on,” he declared, “we will force them to go back where they came from.”¹⁷

Taken together, these statements and actions by the Thai government suggest a concerted effort to propitiate Rangoon. The overriding criterion for any national-security decision affecting bilateral ties now seem to be, what will the SPDC think? This begs the question, Why is the Thai government so anxious to win the favor of a brutal military dictatorship, presiding over one of the world’s poorest economies, particularly when that regime has done nothing to address Thailand’s security concerns? Certainly, it is in Thailand’s interests that Burma be stable and prosperous. It is also in Thailand’s interests to have a working relationship with power-holders next door. Yet these considerations do not seem to justify the lengths to which the government has gone in the past six months.

Opposition politicians and critics of the government suggest that profit may be the motive for Thaksin’s efforts to mollify Rangoon. In May 2002, Shin Satellite, a Thai company owned by the Shinawatra family business, Shin Corp., signed a deal with Burma’s Bagan Cybertech to provide telecommunications services in Burma. The SPDC also uses a Shin satellite to transmit government

¹⁰ The US State Department’s most recent International Narcotics Control Strategy Report states, “The [Burmese] government has yet to put significant pressure on the Wa to stop illicit drug production or trafficking. [...] There was no evident attempt to seize drugs or close heroin or ATS [amphetamine type stimulant] labs in Wa-controlled territories [in 2001]. Drug seizures throughout Burma were roughly equal to or below levels of previous years, and few production labs were destroyed.” US State Department, International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, March 2002, available at <http://www.state.gov/g/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2001/rpt/8483.htm>.

¹¹ *Bangkok Post*, October 31, 2002.

¹² *Bangkok Post*, November 9, 2002.

¹³ *Bangkok Post*, December 5, 2002.

¹⁴ *Bangkok Post*, December 26, 2002.

¹⁵ *The Irrawaddy*, December 11, 2002.

¹⁶ *Bangkok Post*, December 29, 2002.

¹⁷ *The Nation*, December 30, 2002. This statement is particularly worrisome because Thailand previously granted refugee status only to people fleeing from conflict.

television programs.¹⁸ Moreover, in November, Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit announced that the SPDC had approved contracts for Thai companies to carry out four major infrastructure-development projects in Burma. These projects are a hydroelectric dam on the Salween River, a port-development project in Tavoy, a coal mine opposite Thailand's Prachuap Khiri Khan, and a road linking Mae Sot to Rangoon.

It stands to reason that Chavalit would announce Burma's approval of these projects. Chavalit co-chairs the Thai-Burmese Cultural and Economic Cooperation Association, a vehicle for the brand of "personal diplomacy" that Thaksin had promised for Burma. In making the announcement, Chavalit appears to have unwittingly acknowledged the sinister relationship between the development projects and the SPDC's campaign to crush the last intransigent ethnic-minority rebels: "Joint-development projects will make border areas more open and help eliminate bad people, minority people and bad things hidden along the border."¹⁹ Rangoon has long contended that progress on bilateral issues such as drug trafficking will only be possible once ethnic insurgent groups are defeated. Is it possible that the Thai government has come to accept Rangoon's contention?

I was particularly interested to see Chavalit in the context of the border-opening ceremony. The former gen-

eral and one-time prime minister has been a key figure in Thai-Burmese relations over the years and is well known, if not notorious, for his close relations with Burma's military rulers. Chavalit's most conspicuous act in this regard was his one-day visit to Rangoon in December 1998 to meet members of the newly re-constituted military government, then known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council, or SLORC. Then-Army chief Chavalit, accompanied by more than 80 military officers, businessmen and journalists, embraced the SLORC chief, General Saw Maung, calling him "my dear brother." The visit came just three months after the Burmese Army crushed nationwide pro-democracy demonstrations, killing 3,000 people. Chavalit was the first foreign official to visit Burma after the bloody crackdown.²⁰

* * *

I found Walter at his guesthouse early the next morning. He was eating a soft-boiled egg and listening to the Voice of America's News in Special English. The announcer read reports of Chinese missile tests and student protests in Jakarta with superb diction and excruciating slowness. "I love the News in Special English," Walter said. "It's great for a hangover."

We raced up to Ban Huay Phueng through thick morning mist. It was cold, and I shivered as we crested the mountains and sank into the shadows of the valleys. At Ban Huay Pheung we found our friends from the day before, the soldiers in pressed fatigues and polished boots, with fancy yellow cravats arranged in their collars.

"Is Chavalit coming?" I asked.

"No," came the answer.

"Will there be a ceremony today?"

"Maybe. We're not sure."

So the waiting began. Walter wondered off into the village, and I hung around trying to engage the police in conversation. They seemed more reticent than the day before. Perhaps it was because they weren't drinking. I examined their calendar; it had pictures of topless women on it. A policeman asked me what I thought about that.



Two Burmese discuss Thailand's foreign policy. From *New Light of Myanmar*, May 9, 2001.

¹⁸ It is likely that the Shin Satellite service was used by the SPDC to beam anti-Thai propaganda to the Burmese people during the spring and summer of 2002 when the SPDC was trying to stir up anti-Thai sentiment.

¹⁹ *Bangkok Post*, November 27, 2002.

²⁰ The visit was more than just a morale booster for the SLORC. After the September 1988 crackdown, foreign aid to Burma was suspended, and Burma's foreign-exchange reserves stood at roughly US\$15 million. In the days following Chavalit's visit, several Thai logging firms with connections to the Thai military signed deals with the SLORC to harvest Burmese timber. Access to Burma's forest had become essential for Thailand since the Thai government banned logging in November 1988 following severe flooding caused by deforestation. By February 1989, Burma's national timber company had granted twenty concessions along the border, bringing in annual revenue of US\$112 million. Likewise, fishing and gem-stone concessions were also granted to Thai companies. The SLORC offered up Burma's abundant natural resources to Thailand for a quick infusion of foreign exchange. Chavalit had, in effect, saved the SLORC from complete financial collapse. Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency Since 1948*, Bangkok: White Lotus, 1994, pp. 290-1.



The derelict border crossing, north of Ban Huay Pheung.

A soldier showed me one of his roosters and asked if we had cockfighting in the US. I noticed that the curious liaison officer was nowhere to be seen. The sun burned the mist from the fields. It was becoming clear that there would be no ceremony.

It didn't matter to the border guards. As far as they were concerned, the border was already open. The Burmese just hadn't opened their side. (The next day a Thai Army officer at the Thai-Myanmar Township Border Committee office in Mae Hong Son would speculate that the ceremony may have been called off because the Burmese Army doesn't control that section of the border.) The police sat at a small table checking ID cards and entering the names of people going across the border. There weren't many. In the hour or so that I sat at their table, only five people checked in before heading north towards the border.

Just up the road from the checkpoint I saw a small fleet of yellow *songthaews*, pickup trucks fitted with benches that serve as public transport in upcountry Thailand. There was a small market up there, and the policemen suggested I go check it out. "But don't go all the way to the border," one officer warned. "It's not safe."

I found Walter and we wandered up the hill. The market was nothing more than a row of tables on the roadside, covered with thatch roofs. The only activity was at the end of the row, where cheap Chinese footwear spilled from the back of a truck. Old Shan women and young boys from the village picked over the merchandise. A family of Thai Shan from Mae Hong Son, a husband and wife and

her two sisters, had driven up for a bit of sightseeing and they invited us to go with them further up the road to the border. I remembered what the policeman had said, but having been deprived of the border-opening ceremony, I wanted to see the border as consolation. Walter and I climbed into the back of their pickup.

The pavement soon gave way to a deeply rutted dirt track. The road climbed through virgin forest, rich with teak trees and stands of fat bamboo that arced over the switchbacks. Walter kept up his banter, but I couldn't quite concentrate on what he was saying. I tuned in to hear him curse Bill Clinton as a scumbag and in the next breath praise the dexterity of a certain prostitute in Jinghong. I tuned out.

The road leveled and widened into a clearing where several *songthaews* and pickups were parked. To the left, on a hill, was a Thai army outpost. To the right, past some wooden barricades, the dirt track continued north. I walked toward the Army post, but an officer stopped me. The base was off limits. "The border is just up the road," he said.

"Can we go up there?"

"Sure. It's not open on the Burmese side, but it's safe."

Again, Walter and I headed uphill. We walked through the barricades where workers were improving the road. We passed several barefoot children and two old men in knit caps with long knives tucked into their waists. Walter



The sign on the embankment reads, "Nae Mon Lon." Beyond is Shan State.



He has written 'SSA' on his hat. The acronym stands for Shan State Army, a rebel group fighting against Rangoon's military government.

chastised me for not wearing camouflage. "Any problems up there, man, I'll just blend into the jungle."

A wooden fence strung with barbed wire told us we had arrived at the border. Beyond the barbed-wire fence stood a forlorn gateway. It had been painted in bright colors, but the paint had faded and was flaking off. Where the road should have been there was a bulldozed embankment, covered with weeds. Beyond the embankment was Burma, all green hills and blue sky. To the right of the gate a well-worn footpath led up a hill. We scrambled up the path for a better view. Planted on the embankment was a wooden sign in Burmese and English that read Nae Mon Lon. Walter said, "Damn, I wish I had an American flag. I'd run over there and put

almost there. Come on, grandma. Come to freedom!"

When she reached us, the woman placed the basket on the ground. Our Shan friends crowded around and the old woman sold them each some *kao tom mat*, fistfuls of sticky rice and banana, wrapped in banana leaves and bound with twine.

Walter took the old woman's hand. "I'll be damned, grandma. You just opened the border. Congratulations! The border is open for business!" This little transaction would have to do.

I translated Walter's proclamation for the Shan sisters. The border echoed with their laughter. □

it on that sign." The Shan family finally caught up with us, and we all peered into Shan State.

It was perfectly quiet. We spoke in whispers.

Several young men appeared at the foot of the hill and made their way toward us. They had come from Ho Mong, five hours' walk away. They hoped to earn a little money carrying goods from Ban Huay Phueng back to Ho Mong. One of the young men had written "SSA" on his hat in ballpoint pen. He wasn't expecting to encounter any Burmese soldiers.

An old woman appeared in the distance. She balanced a basket on her hip. Walter called out to her in a mock shout, waving his arms, "Come on! Freedom! You're

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and their Activities

Martha Farmelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine economist and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of Italo/Latino machismo. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Andrew Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**

A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew will be spending two years in Uganda, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

Matthew Z. Wheeler (October 2002-2004) • **THAILAND**

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation specializing in South and Southeast Asia, Matt will spend two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt will have to take long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia into account as he lives, writes and learns about the region.

James G. Workman (January 2002 - 2004) • **SOUTHERN AFRICA**

A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of fresh-water supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his six years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

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Phone: (603) 643-5548
E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net
Fax: (603) 643-9599
Web Site: www.icwa.org

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin
Program Assistant: Brent Jacobson
Publications: Ellen Kozak

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