

## **Military Service of Kachin Tribes in British Army during Colonial Period (1885-1942)**

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### **Abstract**

Kachin State was ruled by traditional Sawbwaship administrative system which King Badon abolished and replaced it with Myowun. The Kachin nationals joined military service in the British army stationed in Bhamo (Banmaw) and Military Police Battalion since 1898. In February 1914, 230 outstanding Kachin soldiers were placed at 1/10<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles at Pyin Oo Lwin (Maymyo) for the purpose of military service under Infantry Battalion of King's George and the company organized with Kachin soldiers was named as Kachin Company (A). The Kachin companies gained victory in Mesopotamia battleground. Kachin companies marched to other foreign countries to suppress rebellions and waged war. They served various positions in British army. Some Kachin soldiers won medals in shooting and boxing competitions. Some Kachin soldiers who served in the British were appointed as King's orderly officers and awarded certificates of honour because of their bravery, faithfulness and dutifulness in service. Although most Kachin soldiers were illiterates, but they were outstanding soldiers in warfare and faithful in service. In 1942, there remained only two Kachin platoons in Bhamo. When the Japanese entered into Myanmar and advanced to Myitkyina, the British army retreated to India. Some Kachin soldiers accompanied with the British to India. Some were left in Putao.

**Key words:** Kachin soldiers, Bhamo, Kachin Company

### **Introduction**

Kachin State is situated in the northern part of Myanmar. On 28 December, 1885, the British arrived in Bhamo. Bhamo *Wundauk* (Officer in charge of town) welcomed the British General Prendergast at the harbor. Thus, the British could occupy Bhamo township without any shooting. The loss of Bhamo into the hand of the British was the break of southern defense line in Kachin State.<sup>2</sup> After the British troops advanced and stationed in Moegaung in 1886, they were affected by severe humid climate and illness outbreak among them. Thus, they tried to find a new place in Myitkyina and it became a township with military importance in northern part of Myanmar.<sup>3</sup> In the operation of occupying Upper Myanmar, Bhamo became a strategic British station. Bhamo, at that time, was also an important trading town in Sino-Myanmar trade route. On 1 April 1898, Kachin youths entered into military police under the British government.<sup>4</sup>

### **Kachin Nationals' Resistance against the British**

While the British troops were waging to suppress Kachin nationals in Bahmo District, they visited Moegaung and its environs and occupied it. Moegaung *Myoak* organized anti-British resistance with his followers. Not only Kachin nationals, but also Shan and Bamar nationals were included in his resistance troops. The Kachin leader who resisted against the British in Moegaung was Sama Duwa Gum Seng Li. Although the Kachin resistance troops fought against the British with their available swords, spears and muskets, they had to retreat

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<sup>2</sup> U La Nan Bauk, တိုင်းရင်းသားကချင်လူမျိုးများ ကချင်အိပ်မက်ကို ထုတ်ဖော်ခြင်း ( *Figuring Kachin Dream by Kachin Ethnic Nationals*), Yangon, Yatha Literature Press, 2014, p. 29 (Hereafter cited as La Nan Bauk, *Kachin Dreams*)

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/kachin\\_state](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/kachin_state)

<sup>4</sup> La Nan Bauk, *Kachin Dreams*, p. 28

from Sama(Thama) Village. Then, the British troop occupied Moegaung, Sama and Panga Villages. Twenty one British soldiers died in Moegaung operation.<sup>1</sup>

The British troops also tried to suppress Hpongan Duwa twice in 1886, but they were not successful. In April 1889, the British troops advanced to Sinbo and the resistance against the British in Sinbo was led by Duwa Maran Magam. After Sinbo operation, several skirmishes against the British occurred on their way to Saddon, but Kachin were repulsed because they were not powerful enough to fight against the British.<sup>2</sup> At that time, Saddon Duwa was enlisted in the rebel list as he accepted all anti-British resistance persons. The resistance leaders such as Bo Pho Saw, Bo Ti, Sama Duwa and Wuthou Sawbwa were now taking refuge in Saddon Duwa. As the British main column was in Saddon hill, the resistant leaders decided to attack Saddon fort which is a detachment of Lieutenant Harrison. About 500 resistance fighters from the villages of Saddon, Sagapa, Zinghung, Luktawng, Nbukawng, Chyingtaung, Masa, Samsi and Hpakawn joined the attack of the British Saddon Stockade. The battle took place from 7 to 20 February 1892. Lieutenant Harrison died in the battle and eight sergeants were wounded.<sup>3</sup> It is learned that the British could not easily occupy the places in Kachin region because of the gallant and unwavering resistance of Kachin nationals against the British. The British also acknowledged the courage and military skills of Kachin nationals.<sup>4</sup> Thus, apart from military means, the British tried to persuade Kachin nationals by using several ways to cede other places in Kachin region.

### **Military Service of Kachin National in the British Army**

When Kachin nationals were in trouble and starving for food because of frequent battles between the British forces and Kachin resistance groups, the British persuaded them by distributing food, salt and clothing. Moreover, the British entrusted local Duwas and headmen to conduct local affairs. The British government treated Kachin tribes with kindness and the king of England offered memorial gifts and presents to them. These presents were *Bayingyi* (Kachin people used to pronounced Belgium as *Bayingyi*) muskets, honorary certificates, large gongs, and deer-fur coat.<sup>5</sup>

The British government persuaded energetic young Kachin to conscript military service in the British army. However, the Military Service Recruitment Crop headed by British officials who could speak Kachin language could conscript very few Kachin in raining season because Kachin people hardly travelled in the raining season as the roads were very bad to travel. Moreover, malaria and other diseases such as sore broke out in this season. Thus, recruitment and conscription of soldiers was usually conducted in winter or dry season. Myitkyina is terminus of railway line in northern part of Myanmar. The town was considerably large and it was important to recruit new conscripts.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hpauwung Tang Gun and Chyou Chyi Naw Ja, *The Honour of Our Ancestors in Last Century*, Myitkyina, Kachin Literature and Culture, p. 34 (Hereafter cited as Hpauwung Tang Gun, *The Honour of Our Ancestors*)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp. 35-36

<sup>3</sup> La Nan Bauk, *Kachin Dreams*, pp. 41-42, 44

<sup>4</sup> Hpauwung Tang Gun and Chyou Chyi Naw Ja, *Heritage Warriors, Ancestors' Era (Volume-1)*, Myitkyina, Kachin Literature and Culture, pp. 35-36 (Hereafter cited as Hpauwung Tang Gun, *Heritage warriors*)

<sup>5</sup> Hpauwung Tang Gun, *The Honour of Our Ancestors*, pp. 37-38

<sup>6</sup> Major C.M. Enriquez, *Races of Burma*, Delhi, No Press, 1933, p. 3, 11 (Hereafter cited as Enriquez, *Races of Burma*)

In 1887, the British government formed a company called Burma Sappers and Miners in which most of the troops were Bamar. Apart from this company, no Bamar was recruited in latter batteries. According to situation, Burma Sapper and Miners Company and Burmese Mechanical Transport Company were increased into three companies each. However, Bamar nationals in these companies were gradually dismissed. Instead, other nationals such as Kayin, Chin and Kachin nationals were recruited in military police forces. They were not only responsible for the security of respective towns, but for the security of frontier areas. After the British had occupied Bhamo, the British decided to admit Kachin nationals to take military service on 1 April 1898. Firstly, Kachin youths were recruited as military police as temporary servants. Later, the British acknowledged the qualification and moral attitude of Kachin youths and accepted them as permanent military police. New conscripts were yearly recruited and the British officials wrote recommendations for Kachin youths to join military service. Captain Langtry was entrusted to conduct British military affair among Kachin tribes and to appoint Kachin youths in military police force. The appointment of Kachin youths in military police force also led the way for them to serve military service permanently.<sup>1</sup>

As Kachin youths were admitted to serve in military in 1907, a new company was opened for them in Bhamo Battalion Military Police Force. After training, these new recruited Kachin were sent to repulse against Shan and Chinese insurgents in Loijel and Saddon. They gained victory to suppress these insurgents. The British officers remarked Kachin nationals were clever in warfare. Another two Kachin companies were extended to form in 1909 and in 1914. Altogether three Kachin companies were already formed in Bhamo in 1918.<sup>2</sup>

### **Kachin Soldiers in Mesopotamia Battlegrounds**

When the First World War broke out in Europe, 230 outstanding Kachin soldiers in warfare from Bhamo headed by two British military officers, Major Eburd and Lieutenant Lovis were sent to Pyin Oo Lwin (Maymyo) in February 1914 to enlist in infantry battalion. In these Kachin soldiers, Subedar Jing Phaw Gam and Jamadar Hpau Lu La were included as military officers. When they arrived in Pyin Oo Lwin, they were incorporated as Kachin (A) Company in No.1/10 Gurkha Rifles.<sup>3</sup> Later, this company became an advance unit in famous No.(85) Infantry Battalion in Mesopotamia (Iraq). Kachin (A) Company was dispatched to Mesopotamia on 30 July, 1917 and it arrived there on 15 August of that year.<sup>4</sup> When No. (85) Infantry Battalion in Pyin Oo Lwin was reinforced with Indians, Gurkhas, Bamar, Kayin and Chin, Company (D) was existed as a company composed of Kachin nationals. The Company (D) commander of No.(85) Infantry Battalion which marched to Mesopotamia battleground was Major C.M Enriquez.<sup>5</sup>

There were 428 Kachin soldiers who served military service in British Imperial Army in Mesopotamia. A corporal and six privates died because of illness in Mesopotamia. After the war, 390 Kachin soldiers in which eight officers, 71 corporals and 311 privates survived. In the places of Kachin (A) and (D) companies, Burma Pioneer Company was replaced under the command of Major Harvey Kelly and the company was moved to Pyin Oo Lwin in August 1917. Then, this company was handed over to Major D.N Stuart to command and it was renamed as 1/70<sup>th</sup> Burma Rifles. There were 349 Kachin soldiers from Bhamo who served military service in other foreign countries. Among them, 60 Kachin soldiers were allocated to

<sup>1</sup> The Army & Military Pensioners Ex-Servicemen's Association, *The Kachin Military History*, Bhamo, No Press, 19545, p. (Hereafter cited as *Kachin Military History*)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 24

<sup>3</sup> Hpauwung Tang Gun, *The Honour of Our Ancestors*, p. 1,4

<sup>4</sup> *Kachin Military History*, p. 19

<sup>5</sup> La Nan Bauk, *Kachin Dreams*, p. 81

1/10<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles Battalion and 289 Kachin soldiers to 85<sup>th</sup> Burma Rifles. These Kachin soldiers marched to Mesopotamia and Turkey battlegrounds. As Kachin soldiers were brilliantly fought in battles, Subedar Jing Hpaw Gam was raised to Subedar-Major and he was awarded O.B.E (Order of British Empire) 2<sup>nd</sup> class.<sup>1</sup>

While most Kachin soldiers were fighting in Mesopotamia battlegrounds in 1917, the rest of the 29 Kachin soldiers in Myanmar were organized as 2/70<sup>th</sup> Burma Rifles under Major H.M Rigg in December 1917. The 2/70<sup>th</sup> Burma Rifles was composed of Kachin and Chin nationals. After recruiting new conscripts for the requirement of the numbers of soldiers of a company in 1918, it was transferred to Secunderabad in India. When Major C.M Enriquez returned from Mesopotamia after the war, he proposed to form a separate Kachin National Battalion. Thus, the British government ordered Major C.M Enriquez to open 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Burma Rifles. When 2/70<sup>th</sup> Burma Rifles returned from the war in April 1918, it was renamed as 5/70<sup>th</sup> Burma Rifles. In October 1921, a battalion was separated from 5/70<sup>th</sup> Burma Rifles as 3/70<sup>th</sup> Kachin Rifles and it was stationed in Meikhtila. In the meantime, some Kachin soldiers were still serving in 5/70<sup>th</sup> Burma Rifles. Since October 1921, 5/70<sup>th</sup> Burma Rifles composed of Kachin and Chin soldiers were reorganized as Training Battalion the Burma Rifles.<sup>2</sup>

### Malabar Operation

In October 1921, an insurrection of Moplah (Mappila) tribes in Malabar region of southern India against the British broke out. The British government sent Company (A) and (B) of 3/70<sup>th</sup> Kachin Rifles to suppress this insurrection in India. The number of 103 soldiers (company-B) who attacked Mappila tribes. When the insurrection was suppressed, 153 Mappila tribes and one Kachin soldier died in action. Sargent Gum Ja Naw received I.D.S.M (Indian Distinguished Service Medal) title in Malabar battle.<sup>3</sup> The India Army H.Q (Head Quarter) passed an order to organize 20 battalions in Myanmar in December 1922. Thus, all the battalions in Myanmar were renamed as 20<sup>th</sup> Burma Rifles. New conscripts were recruited for the 3/70<sup>th</sup> Kachin Rifles and it was renamed as 3/20<sup>th</sup> Burma Rifles.<sup>4</sup> As Kachin soldiers had military experiences as they fought in Mesopotamia battlegrounds. There were 123 Kachin soldiers expert in firing Lewis gun, 146 Kachin soldiers skilled in throwing hand grenades, eight signal experts and 67 literate Kachin soldiers.<sup>5</sup>

Kachin soldiers can be found in any battalions in Myanmar as Kachin soldiers from Bhamo Battalion Military Police. They were sent to battalions in Myitkyina and Lashio. There was only one Kachin company available in Bhamo Battalion Military Police in 1922. To reinforce new Kachin conscripts, a new Kachin company was extended to be stationed in Bhamo Battalion Military Police in 1932. Thus, there were two Kachin companies in this battalion in 1942.<sup>6</sup> According to the assigned ratio for the infantry battalions in Myanmar as 50% Kachin, 25% Chin and the other 25% Kayin, they placed two Kachin platoons; one Chin and Kayin platoon in each company.<sup>7</sup> In 1925, Saya Maran Rawbin and Duwa Zaw Tu and other five representatives from Myitkyina and Bhamo firstly demanded the British Governor Sir Spencer Harcourt Butler to give autonomous to Kachin region. However, the demand was declined and instead three Kachin battalions were allowed to form.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Kachin Military History*, pp. 18-19, 24-25

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19,20,27

<sup>3</sup> Hpauwung Tang Gun, *The Honour of Our Ancestors*, p. 54,58

<sup>4</sup> *Kachin Military History*, p. 27

<sup>5</sup> Hpauwung Tang Gun, *The Honour of Our Ancestors*, p. 56

<sup>6</sup> *Kachin Military History*, pp. 24-25

<sup>7</sup> Hpauwung Tang Gun, *Heritage warriors*, p. 20

<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/kachin\\_state](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/kachin_state)

## Outstanding Kachin Soldiers

Two companies from 3/20<sup>th</sup> Burma Rifles commanded by Battalion Commander Lieutenant Colonel Eburd and Subedar Major Jing Hpaw Gam stationed at Malaya in British Empire which was situated in the lower part of Myanmar and Thailand from November 1925 to November 1929 for four years. During the interval period of returning 3/20<sup>th</sup> Burma Rifles to Myanmar between 1925 to 1929 and 1/20<sup>th</sup> Burma Rifles stationed in Malaysia between 1929 to 1932, the following Kachin soldiers were awarded gold medals in shooting competition of various ethnic battalions held in Kuala Lumpur. The Kachin soldiers awarded gold medals were (1) Subedar Pausa Tang, (2) Subedar Lazun Tu, (3) Jamadar Sumlut Tang, (4) Corporal Mading La, (5) Corporal Hkangda Shanja, and (6) Corporal Nhkum Gam.<sup>1</sup>

The Kachin soldiers were also outstanding in tournaments held in Myanmar. The 1/20<sup>th</sup> Burma Rifle moved from Taiping to Myanmar on 27 November 1932 and arrived in Pyin Oo Lwin on 3 December 1932. When they arrived, they took part in shooting competition held in Pyin Oo Lwin in 1933 and they defeated all ethnic soldiers in this competition. The winners of these Kachin soldiers in this competition were:

1. Subedar Pausa Tang (Outstanding Silver Bowl)
2. Jamadar Nding Naw (Outstanding Award in Pistol Shooting)
3. Corporal Mading La (Outstanding Award in Pistol Shooting)
4. Warrant Officer Lahtaw Gam (Outstanding Award in Pistol Shooting)

These soldiers became champions in individual competition. Moreover, two Kachin boxers defeated over 50 competitors.<sup>2</sup>

## Kachin Soldiers and Saya San Peasant Uprising

When the Peasant Uprising led by Saya San broke out in Thayawaddy District on 22 December 1930, the British government sent Kachin soldiers from 2/20<sup>th</sup> and 3/20<sup>th</sup> Burma Rifles to suppress this uprising. After Saya San was arrested on 2 August 1931, the uprising was ceased.<sup>3</sup> Being soldiers, Kachin soldiers had to follow the order to suppress this uprising. After Saya San Peasant Uprising, four Kachin soldiers were awarded certificates of honour by the British government. Corporal La Htaw Naw was awarded I.D.S.M (Indian Distinguished Service Medal) title and was provided eight Rupees monthly for three generations. Sargent N Gyum Tu, Corporal Sha Dau La and Subedar Pausa La Rip were awarded certificates of honour.<sup>4</sup>

## King's Orderly Officers

The Kachin soldiers in the British army were brave, loyal and dutiful servants. Thus, some from these Kachin soldiers were honoured and served in London as King's Orderly Officers. Because of his bravery and courage, Subedar-Major Pang Hkun Zau Tu received honorary medals and certificates of honour firstly among Kachin soldiers. In 1931, he served as orderly officer of King George V in London for six months. Other Kachin soldier who served as orderly officer of King George V in London for four months was Subedar Major

<sup>1</sup> Hpauwung Tang Gun, *The Honour of Our Ancestors*, p. 57,59

<sup>2</sup> *Kachin Military History*, pp. 49-50

<sup>3</sup> Hpauwung Tang Gun, *The Honour of Our Ancestors*, p. 57

<sup>4</sup> *Kachin Military History*, pp. 21-22

Lasng Gam. He was a Lisu national and served military service from 1914 to 1932. He acted as platoon commander in Mesopotamia battlegrounds. King George V himself awarded K.V.M (King's Victoria Medal) to him. Subedar Major Myihto Naw was a corporal when he fought in Mesopotamia battlegrounds. Because of his precise activities in every cases and courage, his position was raised to Subedar Major. Moreover, he dutifully served as orderly officer of King George VI for six months. He arrived in England as Subedar and later promoted as Subedar Major before he returned to Myanmar. He was awarded six outstanding medals and many certificates of honour. Although these Kachin soldiers were not educated persons and had no relations with the British royal families, they are honoured as King's orderly officers because of their loyalty, courage, and precise execution of their duties.<sup>1</sup>

All Burma Military Police forces were renamed as Burma Frontier Force on 1 April 1937.<sup>2</sup> When Japanese army attacked and bombed heavily on Myitkyina in April 1942, it became battleground and the British battalions were disorganized and had to retreat. Some Kachin, Chin, Kayin, Shan, Indian and Gurkhas soldiers accompanied with the British battalions when they retreated to India on foot. When the Japanese army and air forces advanced to the north of Myitkyina, the British government abandoned Sumprabum on 15 May 1942.<sup>3</sup> On the day the British government withdrew from this town, Burma frontier forces were dismantled. After the Japanese army could occupy the whole Myanmar, Puta-O remained as an unoccupied area by the Japanese as the Kachin soldiers bravely and faithfully resisted against the Japanese.

### Conclusion

When the British advanced and occupied towns in northern part of Myanmar, Kachin nationals tried to resist against the British by putting as much effort as they could. Although the Kachin nationals were illiterate, the British admired them because of their bravery, loyalty and dutifulness. The reasons why the Kachin nationals joined military service in the British army are assumed that they were less educated and lived in isolated areas and did not have any contact with the outside world except by the British army and they thought serving military service in the British army could upgrade their socio-economic lives. The British government also acknowledged bravery and courage of Kachin soldiers, and some outstanding Kachin soldiers were enlisted and served as King's orderly officers in London. When the Japanese army entered into Myanmar in 1942, the British army retreated to India through Sumprabum and Puta-O and some Kachin soldiers accompanied with the British. However, other Kachin soldiers remained in Puta-O resisted against the Japanese army and could fly the British Union Jack on the mast during the war which witnessed the bravery and loyalty of Kachin nationals to the British.

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<sup>1</sup> Hpauwung Tang Gun , *The Honour of Our Ancestors*, p. 60,63

<sup>2</sup> *Kachin Military History*, p. 74

<sup>3</sup> Hpauwung Tang Gun , *The Honour of Our Ancestors*, p. 67

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