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Gen. Aung San during a visit to England in 1947

Whose

*Despite what
Tatmadaw was*

By BER

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi shocked many of her supporters and admirers when, in a BBC interview in January of last year, she expressed support for the Tatmadaw, saying: “The truth is that I am very fond of the army, because I always thought of it as my father’s army.”

She also admitted that “there are many who have criticized me for being what they call a poster girl for the army.” But as if to reinforce that impression, last year, on March 27, she attended the Armed Forces Day parade in Naypyitaw and watched soldiers marching in perfect formation past the grandstand where she sat, tanks thundering past, helicopters buzzing and fighting jets flying overhead.

While it is understandable that she does not want to antagonize the military, which is still the key to any fundamental change in Myanmar’s political power structure, her references to “my father’s army” have been questioned by many. Although her father, Aung San, did form the Burma Independence Army (BIA) under Japanese auspices in Bangkok in December 1941, little of that force remained when Myanmar became independent in 1948.

Army?

*daughter says, today's
Gen. Aung San's creation*

LINTNER

Ironically, there have actually been more veterans from the Second World War in various insurgent organizations than in the government's army since independence. Almost the entire People's Volunteer Organization (PVO), a paramilitary force made up of thousands of veterans from the BIA and its successors—the Burma Defense Army, the Burma National Army and the Patriotic Burmese Forces—went underground at independence. Other Myanmar regiments in the government's army mutinied, formed the Revolutionary Burma Army, or joined the insurgent Communist Party of Burma (CPB). The Kayin battalions went underground as well, while ethnic Kachin units remained loyal to the government—at least for a while.

Of the legendary Thirty Comrades, who went to Japan for military training before the Japanese invasion of Myanmar in 1942, two—Bo La Yaung and Bo Taya—commanded the PVO rebellion. Three—Bo Zeya, Bo Ye Htut and Bo Yan Aung—joined the CPB when the communist insurrection broke out shortly after independence. Of the Thirty Comrades, only Brig. Kyaw Zaw, Gen. Ne Win and Maj. Bo Bala remained in the army in the 1950s. Four of the others—Bo Let



Gen. Ne Win seized power in 1962 with a very narrow base of soldiers who were mainly from his own regiment, the 4th Burma Rifles.

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Ya, Bo Yan Naing, Bohmu Aung and Bo Setkya—rallied behind the right-wing resistance, which former Prime Minister U Nu organized on the Thai border in the 1960s. And, in late 1976, Brig. Kyaw Zaw, once the most popular commander in the army who had been pushed out by Gen. Ne Win in 1957, went underground and joined the CPB.

On Sept. 6, 1988, nine out of the 11 survivors of the Thirty Comrades denounced Gen. Ne Win and called on the army to join the pro-democracy uprising of that year. Only Brig. Kyaw Zaw, who then was still with the CPB, was unable to join the appeal against their erstwhile comrade-in-arms, Gen. Ne Win. Later, Brig. Kyaw Zaw also expressed his support for the pro-democracy movement.

The power base of the military regime that seized power in 1962 was actually a very narrow one. It consisted mainly of officers from Gen. Ne Win's old regiment, the 4th Burma Rifles, and nearly all officers who became prominent in the 1960s came from this particular unit. When the Revolutionary Council (RC) was set up in 1962, it was popularly referred

to as "the Fourth Burifs Government." Number two in the RC, Brig. Aung Gyi, came from this regiment, as did the two other most prominent members of the post-1962 junta, Brigadiers Tin Pe and Kyaw Soe.

More ex-4th Burma riflemen rose to power in the 1970s and 1980s as other officers were gradually weeded out of the top military leadership: U Sein Lwin, who served as president during the stormy events of August 1988; stalwart Col. Aye Ko of the only legally permitted political party from 1962 to 1988, the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP); Gen. Kyaw Htin, who served as chief of staff of the army from 1976 to 1985, and defense minister from 1976 to 1988; and U Tun Tin, deputy prime minister and finance minister from 1981 to 1988.

When socialism was discarded after the one-party system was abolished in 1988, the BSPP was renamed the National Unity Party (NUP), with U Tha Gyaw, also a former 4th Burma rifleman, as its first chairman. Even Gen. Ne Win's personal cook, an ethnic Indian called Raju, had served in the same capacity in the 4th Burma Rifles.

It is fair to say, then, that the economically and politically powerful military machine that emerged in the 1950s and, especially, after 1962, was in terms of organization as well as personalities entirely different from the army that Bogyoke Aung San had founded during World War Two.

Dr. Maung Maung, Myanmar's official historian during the pre-1988 regime, estimated that there were maybe 2,000 soldiers at Gen. Ne Win's disposal when he took over as commander-in-chief in 1949, but they were all scattered in decimated, weak battalions and companies. The army that was rebuilt after independence was not Bogyoke Aung San's army, but Gen. Ne Win's army, with the 4th Burifs at its core.

In October 1958, officers from across the country met in Meiktila, and, for the first time, the army formulated its own policy. A document entitled "The National Ideology of the Defense Services" strongly resembles the old *dwifungsi* concept of the Indonesian

army, i.e., that the military has to play a role in a country's social and political development, as well as its defense. The Myanmar and Indonesian armies are the only armies in non-communist Asia that have developed their own ideologies.

Today, almost all those who served with the 4th Burifs have passed away, but the legacy remains. Gen. Ne Win created an army that was predominantly Myanmar rather than multi-ethnic—and a financially strong and ideologically motivated military machine over which civilian, or even pseudo-civilian, governments have virtually no control.

Even the 2008 Constitution stipulates that "all the armed forces in the Union shall be under the command of the Defense Services"—making them, in effect, autonomous and not answerable to any non-military authority—and that the Tatmadaw shall also "lead in safeguarding the Union against all internal and external dangers."

Chapter One of the 2008 Constitution enables "the Defense Services to be able to participate in the National political leadership of the State"—a principle far from that envisaged by Bogyoke Aung San when he led the struggle for independence. In a speech in Yangon on May 23, 1947, he said "the defense of a free Burma is a national responsibility entrusted to the State. The State alone will shoulder this responsibility." The highest organs of the state, of course, would be the elected Parliament and the government. The 1947 Constitution stated very clearly that "the right to raise and maintain military, naval and air forces is vested exclusively in the Parliament."

It remains to be seen whether Myanmar can shake off the legacy of the 4th Burifs and the authoritarian system that was introduced by its erstwhile commander, Gen. Ne Win. But let us be very clear: Aung San's army disintegrated after the Second World War. And the new Tatmadaw that emerged after independence, and, especially, after the 1962 coup, is an entirely different entity. ■