

## Incident at Three Pagodas Pass

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*An official visit to Three Pagodas Pass by the Director of Australia's Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO) in 1994 did not go exactly as planned and could have caused a diplomatic incident.*

After decades of strained bilateral relations, Australia's defence ties with Myanmar are gradually being restored.<sup>1</sup>

The office of the defence attaché (DA) in the Australian Embassy in Yangon (formerly Rangoon), which closed in 1979, was reopened in 2014. This coincided with a port visit by HMAS *Childers*—the first by a Royal Australian Navy vessel since the frigate HMAS *Quiberon* called in 1959.<sup>2</sup> With the inauguration of Aung San Suu Kyi's semi-civilian government in early 2016, defence engagement has been given a higher priority. The inaugural meeting of the Australia–Myanmar Strategic Dialogue was held in Yangon in March 2017.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Andrew Selth, 'Defence Relations with Burma: Our Future Past', *The Interpreter*, 4 March 2013, [www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/defence-relations-burma-our-future-past](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/defence-relations-burma-our-future-past).

2 Senator the Hon. David Johnston, 'Acting Minister for Defence, and Minister for Foreign Affairs: Joint Media Release—Australian Government Strengthening Ties with the Myanmar Government', Media release, Department of Defence, Canberra, 20 January 2014, [www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/david-johnston/media-releases/acting-minister-defence-and-minister-foreign-affairs-joint](http://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/david-johnston/media-releases/acting-minister-defence-and-minister-foreign-affairs-joint).

3 Senator the Hon. Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, Minister for International Development and the Pacific, 'Australia–Myanmar Strategic Dialogue', Speech, 13 March 2017, [ministers.dfat.gov.au/fierravanti-wells/speeches/Pages/2017/cf\\_sp\\_170313.aspx](http://ministers.dfat.gov.au/fierravanti-wells/speeches/Pages/2017/cf_sp_170313.aspx) [page discontinued].

These developments are well documented, but over the years there have been others that are not as well known. One in particular springs to mind.

In 1994, an incident occurred at Three Pagodas Pass on the Thailand–Myanmar border, west of Bangkok. While minor in itself, it had the potential to complicate the diplomatic relationship between Australia and Myanmar at a difficult time. Known only to a few people at the time, it deserves at least a footnote when the history of Australia’s relations with Myanmar is finally written.

In September that year, Major General John Hartley, Director of Australia’s Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO) from 1992 to 1995, was invited to Thailand as the guest of his Thai counterpart, Royal Thai Army (RTA) Major General Teerawat Patumanonda. General Hartley was accompanied on his visit by two DIO analysts—one an army lieutenant colonel and the other a civilian. While in Thailand, he was escorted by the Australian DA in Bangkok, who was an army colonel.

As part of a familiarisation tour, General Hartley was taken by UH-1H helicopter from the RTA Ninth Infantry Division’s Camp Surasri in Kanchanaburi Province to Three Pagodas Pass. Located in the First Army Region, the Ninth Infantry Division was the RTA unit responsible for border affairs in Kanchanaburi. A special task force within the division was charged with coordinating security and refugee affairs at the local level, including around the pass.

Three Pagodas Pass is of considerable historical importance. For centuries, it was one of the main land routes between Burma (as Myanmar was known before 1989) and Siam (as Thailand was known before 1939). During World War II, it was where the infamous ‘death railway’ from Ban Pong to Thanbyuzayat crossed the border. For years, an old Japanese C56 locomotive was preserved there as a monument to the 13,000 Allied prisoners of war and 80,000 Asian labourers who died working on the railway.

Now a major tourist attraction, the pass receives thousands of visitors every year. However, in 1994, due to its strategic significance and political sensitivity, it was a restricted area.

The pass played an important role in Myanmar’s civil wars. During the 1980s, it was the scene of bitter fighting between the Myanmar Army (MA) and insurgents from the separatist New Mon State Party (NMSP),

which effectively controlled the area until 1990. After the SLORC took power in Myanmar in 1988, more than 35 ethnic armed groups agreed to ceasefires. The NMSP made such a pact in 1995, but in 1994, tensions around Three Pagodas Pass were still high.

The pass also fell within the operating area of the larger and more powerful Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), which had been fighting Myanmar's central government since the country regained its independence from the British in 1948. The KNLA was a tough and determined force that sought a separate Karen state. By 1994, a number of breakaway Karen groups had negotiated ceasefires with the SLORC, but the KNLA had refused to do so (this policy would not change until 2012).

These tensions affected Myanmar–Thai relations. Insurgents from the ethnic armed groups routinely crossed the border into Thailand, both to recuperate and to outflank MA positions. Yangon (then Myanmar's capital) believed that Bangkok was secretly aiding the rebels to weaken the MA and destabilise the new military government. Local villagers displaced by the fighting sought sanctuary in Thailand. In July 1994, 6,000 people did so after the MA attacked and destroyed a large Mon refugee camp near Three Pagodas Pass.

Adding to these complications, the demarcation of the border in this area was disputed. The boundary between the two countries was broadly defined in negotiations between the East India Company and the King of Siam in 1826, and through subsequent Anglo-Siamese border commissions, but ambiguities still existed around Three Pagodas Pass. The actual town and border checkpoint that carry this name lie at the end of a thin 1.5-kilometre-long sliver of Thai territory, surrounded by Myanmar on three sides.

It was for all these reasons that General Hartley had asked to visit the area.

The Iroquois helicopter carrying the DIO delegation landed on Thai territory near the eponymous three pagodas, where General Hartley was greeted by the local military commander, an RTA colonel. While they were chatting, a utility truck pulled up and an MA colonel alighted. He was greeted warmly by the RTA colonel, who introduced him to General Hartley as his Myanmar counterpart. Despite occasional political tensions between Bangkok and Yangon, the two enjoyed a friendly working relationship.

The two colonels briefly spoke together. The MA colonel then got back into his utility, gave an instruction to his driver and they drove off. The RTA colonel invited General Hartley and his party to get into a couple of jeeps that were standing nearby. They then followed the MA vehicle. The Australian party soon realised that they had crossed the international border. On being questioned about this, the Thai colonel explained that the Myanmar colonel had invited them to his house 'for tea', and it would have been impolite to refuse.

At this point, it should be noted that General Hartley, the Australian DA, the DIO lieutenant colonel and the Thai colonel were all wearing military uniforms. Only the civilian DIO analyst was in mufti.

The MA colonel's 'house' turned out to be a bunker within a heavily fortified army base, about 3 kilometres inside Myanmar. It was protected by berms and fences crowned with razor wire. Machine-gun posts were visible by the main gate and at various points around the perimeter. The mixed Australian–Thai party crowded into the MA commander's rather cramped living quarters, where they were seated around a table. Introductions were made by the Thai colonel, who acted as a translator.

While this was happening, a woman assumed to be the colonel's wife passed out cups of sweet, milky tea. The civilian DIO analyst, however, had a particular fondness for the local green tea—a taste he had picked up during a diplomatic posting to the Australian Embassy in Yangon in the 1970s. He asked the colonel's wife whether he could have a cup of that instead. As a courtesy, and because he doubted the woman could speak English, he spoke in Burmese.

The colonel's wife was rather startled to hear her own language spoken by a foreigner, but immediately went away and brought him a cup of green tea. This time, however, she was accompanied by an MA major, who squeezed in alongside the analyst and immediately began quizzing him in Burmese. He had obviously been tipped off by the colonel's wife that one of the foreign visitors spoke their language.

The major was keen to know who General Hartley was and what he was doing in Thailand. He was also curious to know how the DIO analyst came to speak Burmese. As far as his limited knowledge of the language allowed, the analyst explained the circumstances of the general's

unscheduled visit to the MA base and gave a little of his own background. In doing so, he was acutely aware that Australia's relations with Myanmar at that time were rather strained.

In 1988, Canberra had strongly condemned the way in which Myanmar's armed forces crushed a nationwide prodemocracy uprising. Before Ne Win's moribund socialist regime was replaced with the SLORC, more than 3,000 demonstrators were killed. The Australian foreign minister had also expressed his government's concern in 1990, after opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest and the SLORC ignored the NLD's landslide victory in general elections held that year.

More to the point, bilateral military contacts were politically sensitive. Since 1979, the Australian DA in Bangkok had been dually accredited to Myanmar, to help him monitor developments there. However, after the 1988 uprising, defence cooperation had been suspended. Australia had joined Western efforts to isolate and punish the new regime. In 1991, Canberra imposed an embargo on arms sales, excluded Myanmar officers from attending Australian military colleges and halted defence visits.

It quickly became apparent that the MA major was a member of Myanmar's powerful Military Intelligence Service (MIS). In answering his questions, the DIO analyst was conscious that whatever he said would probably be reported back to MIS headquarters in Yangon, and he framed his replies accordingly. While General Hartley's visit to Myanmar was unplanned—indeed, inadvertent—it was also unauthorised. If made public, it had the potential to prompt some awkward questions in both Yangon and Canberra.

Happily, for the Australians, morning tea was soon over and, after friendly farewells, the party was driven back to Thailand and their waiting RTA helicopter. Despite an unscheduled landing in a paddy field on the flight back, due to bad weather, the party disembarked at Camp Surasri that evening none the worse for their experience.

While perhaps minor in itself, this vignette seems worth recording. It is offered here as a small contribution to the history of the Australia–Myanmar relationship, and of contacts between the armed forces of the two countries at a time of momentous changes in both.

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