

'Burma Surgeon' Becomes Living Legend for His Work on Asian Frontier

By GERALD S. SNYDER
United Press International
NEW YORK (UPI)—In a tin-roofed hospital on a lonely Asian frontier, a stubborn old man bends daily to the task of helping the sick.

His chest is sunk and his once-sturdy body is wracked with amoebic dysentery. But Dr. Gordon Stifler Seagrave, now 66, is a living legend. The "Burma Surgeon" goes on with his work.

Some 40 years ago, as a young Johns Hopkins graduate, Seagrave fished some used and broken medical instruments out of a wastebasket, tucked a Bible under his arm, and set out for Namkham in the far northeast corner of Burma. The hos-

pital he took over was a decaying wooden building with 20 beds. Its only patient—a man with a leg ulcer—Two Miles From Border

Today on a hillside overlooking that same green valley, two miles from the Red China border, some 15,000 backward hill people walk, ride or are carried on litters each year to the hospital compound "Daddy" Seagrave built for them. An area populated by an estimated 400,000 people depend on it for medical care.

Dr. M. Donald Olmanson, 32, a lanky doctor from St. Peter, Minn., who is the first American physician to work with Seagrave and return to this country, flipped a switch in his

New York hotel room. The problems Seagrave's medical staff battles were displayed in alarming clarity on one of the walls.

Medical slides of patients riddled with malaria, gonorrhea, tuberculosis, leprosy, smallpox, acute anemia . . . disturbing—almost horrifying—to a healthy American.

"On an average," he said, "Seagrave's patients have two or three major diseases, sometimes as many as five. Diseases you simply read about in textbooks here. The life expectancy is 29 years and the infant mortality rate 50 per cent."

"That was a 2-pound infant baby," he pointed. "It lived for five weeks and died. No in-

Help has come from American drug companies (about \$250,000 worth each year), the Burmese government and a U.S. fund-raising group called the American Medical Center for Burma. But the biggest problem by far is finding a successor for the flagging old doctor, beloved by the Burmese.

"I don't want this hospital to die when I die," Dr. Seagrave said. "I want it to continue and the only way I can prove to these Burmese here in Burma that I've meant every word I ever said to them on the subject is for me to die right here in Namkham. My accepting a small salary (\$90 a month) proves to them that I'm not a

missionary. But I can't prove to them that my prime interest is in their welfare unless I spend my whole life here. And that means to the very end of my life."

In August, the Medical Center sent Dr. Joseph F. Newhall, a surgeon and gynecologist from Bradenton, Fla., to replace Dr. Olmanson and assist in the vital nurses training program Seagrave has set up.

Olmanson returned to the United States with his pregnant wife when the difficulty of educating his three other children became pressing. "I feel that a man to stay will have to be somebody without children," Dr. Olmanson said.

Mission Aid Tradition

Mission aid to Burma has been a Seagrave tradition for 128 years. Both of Seagrave's great grandfathers were Baptist missionaries in Burma, as were his grandparents and his parents.

Born in Rangoon in 1897, Seagrave is the last of 23 of his family to have lived and worked continuously in Burma, a country with one of the lowest per capita incomes in the world and with more than 2 million landless peasants in a population of some 20 million Burmese and constituent races—the tribes of Kachin, Chin, Shan and Kayah.

Seagrave has never considered himself a missionary—just a "man with a mission," as he likes to put it.

In 1942, he walked out of Burma in the retreat into India under Gen. "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell during the Japanese invasion. Two years later he was back again. But in 1950, he was

arrested for alleged treason against the government, tried, found guilty and sentenced to jail.

He spent six months in prison and another year and a half under house arrest before the Burma supreme court exonerated him.

Back in Namkham, the people turned out by the thousands to cheer him. "The old man is back!" they shouted. With the help of a faithful Goanese-Indian doctor, Olwen Silgado, and a few nurses, Seagrave was back in business.

The revolutionary government of Gen. Ne Win is behind the Burma surgeon and, when he's gone, will have the benefit of some 750 nurses he has trained. But as Dr. Olmanson put it: "I don't think anybody is going to be a true successor to Dr. Seagrave."

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CONTINUES WORK—Dr. Gordon Stifler Seagrave, the famed "Burma Surgeon" of World War II, now 66, continues with his work and has become a living legend. The picture at left shows

Dr. Seagrave at his Hankham hospital in 1960. The picture at right shows Dr. Seagrave being driven in a Jeep by Burmese nurse on a medical errand somewhere in Burma in 1942. (UPI)

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Changes Noted in Burma Since First Elizabethan Traveler Entered Area

By U BA THAN
United Press International
RANGOON, Burma (UPI)—It was 380 years ago that an Elizabethan traveler and trader set out from faraway England to open the spice and jewel markets of the Orient.

Ralph Fitch journeyed alone through India in 1583 and then onward across the Lushai and China hills into the Irrawaddy Valley and the ancient Burmese capital of Pegu.

Here lived the white elephants of the king of Burma. Fitch wrote of how he watched in wonder as the stately procession made its way to the river bank.

Since Fitch's time, there have been many changes in Burma. There are still plenty of elephants around, but they don't live quite so comfortably. The elephant is an important beast

of burden and does much of the heavy hauling in Burma, particularly in the milling operations of the teak forests.

But change, for better or worse, has been the keynote of Burmese life down through the centuries. The present revolutionary government of the Union of Burma uses the catchword "forward" in its program to change the Burmese way of life overnight, to bring it into harmony with the 20th century world.

The revolutionary government led by Gen. Ne Win as chairman took over in an almost bloodless coup on March 2, 1962, from the tottering regime of Premier U Nu of the Pyidaungsu, or Union party, an offshoot of the anti-fascist Peoples Freedom League (AFFL), the party that led Burma to independ-

ence under Gen. Aung San. The latter, like many of his contemporaries in Southeast Asia, was assassinated July 19, 1947, only a few months before independence was proclaimed on Jan. 4, 1948.

To many people in the Western world, the mention of Burma brings to mind only the famed Burma Road of World War II, or Rudyard Kipling's well known poem, "On the Road to Mandalay." The Burmese are a bit annoyed by the geographical misconceptions in the poem, since there are few flying fishes around land-locked Mandalay, and the sun doesn't really come up like thunder out of China across the bay. There is no bay and China is 200 miles away across the mountains.

Burma is seven times the size of England but has only

one-third Britain's population in an area of 261,789 square miles. With independence granted by British Prime Minister Clement Attlee in 1948, the Burmese voted to leave the British Commonwealth. On Jan. 4, 1948, the 20 million Burmese and other constituent races—the tribes of Kachin, Chin, Shan, and Kayah—became independent and their country became the 58th member of the United Nations.

Rangoon, the capital, is designed like an American city with broad parallel avenues crossed at right angles by narrow streets. It is a city bursting at its seams. Designed for a maximum population of 600,000 it now has one million. Three new "satellite" towns have sprung up almost overnight north of the city on sites that were once scrubland.

Mainly Produces Rice

Burma mainly produces rice. Its exportable surplus today, however, is far below the pre-World War II record of 3.5 million bushels annually. Also exported is the finest teak; minerals like tin, tungsten, and wolfram; beans; precious stones such as rubies and emeralds; jade, and small quantities of lead and silver.

The dominant religion in Burma is Buddhism, although there are substantial numbers of Christians, Muslims and Hindus.

The revolutionary government has mapped out a program in what is called the "Burmese Way to Socialism" for which they delved deep into Buddhist theology, as well as into the writings of Nasser, Tito and the publications of the Fabian society. The "Burmese Way" as it is popularly called is non-Marxist. But its authors cite the special circumstances existing in Burma for the fact that it does not follow the Fabian concept of the "inevitability of gradualness."

Making Drastic Changes

The government is bringing about drastic changes in almost every field of activity. It has openly stated its intention to nationalize all means of production and distribution. It has already nationalized banks, bought up the services of all the international news agencies, nationalized the multi-million dollar rice export business and soon will take over the equally profitable rice-milling industry.

But if the measures taken appear to be harsh, the problems which the government faces are serious. According to official estimates there are over two million landless peasants in the country. The Burmese have one of the lowest per capita incomes in the world and the farmer, mainstay of the nation's economy, lives a life that is, to quote Ne Win, "miserable and down-trodden." The gulf between rich and poor is wider than ever.

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